

## L Is for (Loser) Literature

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# L Is for (Loser) Literature

by [youreyeslookliketheocean](#)

## Summary

As an English major, there are two things you know without having to be taught. One, money is tight. Thanks, capitalism. Two, books deserve to be, if not held in pristine condition, at least treated with an ounce of respect. An ounce. That's all Techno asks.

This boy—brown eyes narrowing as a piece of onion tumbles to the book's pages, as if it's the literature's fault and not his own—won't even give it that.

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Or, the sbi college au where Techno argues the value of Capital L literature and Wilbur commits book hate crimes.

# Chapter 1

Every day, at exactly 11:54a.m., a brown-haired kid wearing a black beanie and clutching a fabric guitar case sits down in the corner of the cafeteria to eat. He's ridiculously tall and thin as a stick, but wears long sweaters and baggy hoodies to try and cover it. It doesn't work. He sticks out like a sore thumb.

Sometimes he comes in with glasses on—silver and round, glinting in the ridiculously bright fluorescents (seriously, it's like a hospital in there). Other times not. Sometimes he's got a book, a novel or textbook that differs in genre each week. He'll spread it out on the table in front of him, and Techno will silently seethe as he drips ketchup on it for the sixth time.

Those things all vary, but the time never does. 11:50. Boy walks in. Grabs his food. Sits down at 11:54 and, if he's brought a book, that's open no more than a minute later. It's like clockwork. And Techno is as fascinated by it as he is incredibly pissed off.

*Who the fuck is this kid?*

It's 12:01, and Techno has been watching the guy smear mustard from his hotdog across the pages of some thick, yellow-paged, hardback book for the past seven minutes. It's ridiculous how easy he makes it look. Like he isn't ruining art that took years to create with five seconds of yellow mustard. The boy brings the hotdog up to his lips—it's ridiculously overloaded, who even *likes* that much onion?—and a dollop of yellow dribbles down to the pages beneath him. He reaches to wipe it away, but the damage has already been done. It smears across the page, and Techno's urge to cross the room and snatch the book away from the brown-haired boy's filthy hands is fanned from a spark to an angry, spitting fire.

As an English major, there are two things you know without having to be taught. One, money is tight. Thanks, capitalism. Two, books deserve to be, if not held in pristine condition, at least treated with an ounce of respect. An ounce. That's all Techno asks.

This boy—brown eyes narrowing at the page as a piece of onion tumbles to the book's pages, as if it's the literature's fault and not his own—won't even give it that.

It's not Techno's place to step in, though, so he keeps to himself and seethes quietly. Secretly.

It's not that he's a stuck-up, prestigious scholar. He's not a stuck-up, prestigious scholar. It's just basic knowledge that books and spill-able foods don't mix. And someone spent *time* on those words. Someone sat in front of a keyboard, or typewriter, or gripped a pencil until their fingers bled to expertly craft a story that bared their soul to the world. They took the truth and twisted it into something that could be felt in the heart, heard in the soul. And this was how they were being repaid?

At some point in history, people stopped caring about capital L Literature, and Techno doesn't think it's "stuck-up" to think that's wrong.

So no, he doesn't step in. He finishes his crappy cafeteria macaroni and cheese and diced pineapple, and slings his backpack over one shoulder. He drops his empty plate off at the sinks, and leaves the cafeteria with an oatmeal raisin cookie he snagged from the dessert counter. But he thinks about it. He seethes, quietly, all the way back to his dorm. He pounds his frustration out against his laptop keyboard, and stares furiously at his room's puckered and popcorned ceiling until midnight, when he reluctantly rolls over to fall asleep.

The next day, he does it all over again.

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Phil Watson did not grow up thinking he'd become a professor. The career just sort of... snuck up on him. He'd been in a four-thousand level literature course his senior year of college, and as the professor droned on about a concept that *could have been interesting if he'd only stop talking like a monotone robot*, Phil decided he was going to become a professor. Out of spite.

He'd gone back to his dorm and rush-applied to graduate schools. He'd gotten accepted to one out of four. He'd graduated. He'd graduated again, six years later. And now here he was, bent over a desk in the tiniest office in the world, papers scattered everywhere—as if a tsunami had hit them—and fingers stained red from the pen he was using to grade sixty-five students essays.

The light over his head flickers again, and he sighs. Freshmen composition essays were always his least favorite to grade. It wasn't always the students' faults; half of them were STEM majors who didn't give a shit about reading, writing, or understanding literature like Phil did. He couldn't blame them for having different interests. He could, however, blame them for not listening to his last lecture, in which he'd explained *in explicit detail* how *exactly* to set up an academic essay. He'd drawn diagrams for the visual learners. He'd spoken through it for audio learners. He'd written a fucking *equation* out for the math majors, and still, no one seemed to have grasped the concept of a thesis statement. Weren't they supposed to have learned this in high-school?

Phil sets the red pen down and glances at the clock. It's nearly eight. He should be home by now, sitting on the sofa with Kristin, drinking a glass of wine and watching *The Office* (UK version. They were doing a full binge of both). She'd been texting him on and off for the past hour, laughing and teasing him over his distress like the wonderful wife she was.

*Oldza*, she'd jokingly called him. The text-bubbles bounced for a few seconds more before her second message came through: *Getting all upset over freshmen not understanding literature. Aw. You're such a nerd ;)*

Phil responded with a crying emoji, and she laughed at that too.

Now he smiles, thinking of her. She's probably home from her job at the psychology office already. He wonders what she's making for dinner. It's her day to cook, but she tends to take

over his days, too, even when he doesn't ask her to. They've both found that he's prone to burning things. Including, on one rare occasion, an entire oven mitt. It was an accident.

He's about to shove back from his desk and start packing up to leave when three raps at the office door freeze him in place.

He shoots another glance at the clock. It's eight 'o' one. His office hours are long over, and most of the other professors have gone home already.

"Yes?" Phil asks, and then fervently prays it's not the university president coming to inform him that the liberal arts budget is going down again.

It's not. When the door opens, Niki, the university librarian, stands on the other side. She shifts awkwardly between her feet, biting her bottom lip and looking awfully pale. Her cropped, bubblegum pink hair is frazzled, as if she'd run all the way here.

"What's wrong?"

"Can you come to the library?" Niki asks. "There's a bit of a... situation."

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Techno doesn't know why he's surprised when, on the hunt for a book for his literature analysis class, he stumbles across not one, not two, not even three, but *five* books glued shut with crystallized syrup. Actually, no, he does know why he's surprised. It's because *books and food don't mix*. Everyone knows that. Everyone except for the one person Techno sees every day at exactly 11:54a.m.

"Techno, I appreciate the concern. Really, I do. But I can't ban him from the library."

"Why not?"

Phil sighs and presses a finger to the space between his eyebrows. "Because he's a student, and part of his tuition pays for access?"

"So? Take that part of his tuition out."

"I'm a professor, not the president."

"So tell the president."

Phil stares at him blankly. Then a laugh bubbles from his mouth. He shakes his head, leaning over the circulation desk and placing his head in his hands.

"Techno—"

Techno pushes the stack of ruined books he'd accumulated across the counter. The subjects vary: an anthology of early 18th century British Literature, a physics theory book, music history, the biography of some composer Techno doesn't even want to attempt saying the name of. One thing is the same through all of them, though. And that is the sticky paste, ketchup stains, and coffee rings left on their pages.

He jabs his finger into the top book's cover. "Look at these! They're glued shut!"

Phil looks up.

He looks tired, Techno thinks. It's only eight fifteen. Still, most of the other professors have probably gone home already. Techno feels the slightest ounce of guilt creep up on him. He pushes it away. This is important.

"Look," Phil says, "I can't do much. Niki can't do much. We can give him a warning, and he'll definitely have a fine to pay, but besides that there's not much we can do. The books are already ruined."

"I just want you to stop him. It's like... it's like he's doing it on purpose. I see him in the cafeteria every day, and no matter what he has he *always* finds a way to get it on the book. Even dry cereal! How do you stain something with dry cereal?"

Phil pushes his chair back from the desk. Niki fidgets over by the back wall, twisting a ring around and around her middle finger. She'd been utterly silent ever since she got back to the library with Phil in tow. Techno thinks he might have scared her earlier, when he first came downstairs with the books. Oops.

"I'll see what I can do, okay?" Phil says, trying to defuse the situation. "Niki can look up his library records and send him a notification, and I can make sure the fine gets collected. You just... don't worry about it, okay? He's a kid. Kids do this shit sometimes. It's not your problem to take care of."

"We're in college, Phil. He's an adult."

Phil smiles, and even though there are bags under his eyes, his eyes twinkle. "Oh trust me, you're still kids. Now go on. Get out of here. I'll see you in class tomorrow."

Techno sighs. If even Phil won't side with him, aka Literature Professor Extraordinaire, then he's fighting a losing battle.

He takes his singular book from the counter and tucks it under his arm.

"Alright. Night Niki. G'night, Professor Watson."

"Philza, Techno. Or Phil. You know me better than that."

"G'night *Phil*."

Phil's laughter echoes behind him as Techno turns and makes his way out of the library lobby.

The air outside is cool when he steps into it—the tail-end of winter trailing chilly wind as it slips into spring. Spring semester has always been Techno’s favorite. It goes by quick at first, with January and February abruptly launching them into a new year, then slows in March with mid-terms and spring break, before finally turning into a foot-race against the clock as finals and final projects and *summer* loom just around the corner. It’s exciting, invigorating, and as the weather warms so does Techno’s spirits.

He should stop concerning himself over this frankly trivial book matter. Phil was right, it’s not his problem. He shouldn’t be getting all fired up over someone else’s negligence. But he couldn’t stop getting the feeling that this “kid” was doing it on purpose, and *that*? That *was* his problem. Because Techno was an English major. He studied literature. He fell in love with it. He fell in love with the concept of Art. Capital L Literature. It was a part of him as much as his left arm was.

If this guy decided that literature was nothing more than a glorified napkin, what did that say about Techno?

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*BANG!*

Wilbur looks up with startled eyes and straight into the face of a furious demon.

Okay. That may have been an exaggeration. The boy standing in front of him is not a demon. He’s a twig wearing a plaid jacket and tan khakis. He has pink hair, cropped short around his shoulders. But behind thick-framed glasses his brown eyes are so bright they almost glow red in the cafeteria fluorescents, and he is staring down at Wilbur like he can’t decide whether to start ripping apart his soul or not. There is a book slammed down on the table, and if Wilbur had looked harder maybe he would have recognized it as the same 20th century British Lit book he’d been skimming through last week for class, but he doesn’t. And thus he assumes—as anyone in this situation would—that it’s a satanic book of curses.

“Hm?” Wilbur asks oh-so-eloquently. Ketchup drips from the chicken nugget in his hand.

The boy in front of him, if possible, looks even angrier. His red eyes flicker down to the table, and Wilbur follows his gaze to see the ketchup had landed smack in the middle of his poetry textbook.

“Is that Walt Whitman?”

Wilbur honestly has no clue. He glances down, realizes the ketchup has fallen onto the author’s name, and swipes it off.

“How the fuck did you know that?”

“English major privileges.”

Ah. So demon boy is an English major. That actually... explains a few things. Namely the t-shirt reading “English Majors Get Lit.”

“Want to explain your book hate crimes to me?” English Major asks.

Wilbur frowns. “Huh?”

English Major pushes the book he’d slammed down on the table over to Wilbur’s side.

*Ohh*, yep. That’s definitely his British Literature anthology from last week. He’d returned it to the library three days ago because it was boring as fuck and if he had to read another sappy love poem or story about death he was going to kill something. Plus, all the writers had a god complex.

“Did you do this?” It’s English Major again.

Wilbur blinks down at the book in front of him. Did he do what? There’s nothing wrong with the book.

“Do what?”

There’s a huff, and then English Major pulls out the chair opposite Wilbur and plops himself down into it. He reaches across the table to peel open the anthology. *Peel*, yes. It has to be peeled, because beneath it is a fine layer of sticky sugar.

“This. And this—” He turns a few pages, and suddenly a dried coffee stain is staring up at Wilbur’s face. “—and this.” A few more pages, and okay there’s literally nothing wrong with those. What is he even on about?

Wilbur says as much, but English Major just points to the massive dog-eared sections of the book. They were done haphazardly, obviously rushed, and some look more like giant wrinkles than actual tabs—like someone took a crimping iron and violently attacked the paper with it.

“What? You don’t dog-ear your books?” Wilbur asks defensively.

“No! Of course not. Who does that?”

“Me. My mother. The person next to me in math class.”

“STEM majors *would* dog-ear their books.”

Wilbur wrinkled his nose. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The English major shrugged. “Nothing, I guess. Are you a STEM major?”

It’s probably the first normal question he’s asked him. Wilbur’s shoulders relax slightly.

“No. Music.”



The boy tilts his head, glasses flashing in the bright cafeteria lighting. “Really?”

Wilbur gestures to the guitar case sitting on the floor next to him. It’s black and dusty, small holes torn in its fabric from all the times the various pins he’d stuck on it got caught in door frames, on clothes, on his backpack—but the thing inside it is his pride and joy. He’s played guitar practically since he was old enough to hold one. His mom liked to joke he’d used music as a way to talk before his mouth knew how to form words. He’d been a late bloomer: a late talker, late walker, late at pretty much everything. But music, he’d known forever. Music was like breathing to him. And that wasn’t much of an exaggeration.

“Oh. Don’t you understand art, then?”

“Art? I just said I’m a music major—”

“No, not visual art. Like... *Art*. Capital A. Abstract noun.”

Wilbur thinks of lullabies his mother sang him. He thinks of radios blasting, indie bands, and the quiet pluck of his ex-best friend’s guitar. He thinks of the way a good melody can fill him up until he feels like a bomb, about to explode. He thinks of the way a singular note can shoot like an arrow, carving a line through his veins and striking right into his chest—bullseye.

“Of course I understand art,” he says out loud. “I just think that seventeenth century white men’s wrinkly ‘literature’ isn’t all that. I’ve had this shit shoved down my throat since high school, and it’s always the same. Some old white dude’s wife dies, he writes a sonnet comparing her corpse’s skin to pale moonlight, sends it to a publisher and calls it a day. I’ve heard more poetic things on Reddit.”

Pink-haired dude scoffs. Wilbur really needs an actual name for him.

“It’s not always about being poetic. It’s about being relatable.”

“How am I supposed to relate to some old guy living in the eighteen hundreds?”

Here, English Major pauses. He contemplates for a second, drumming his fingers silently on the table. Then he sticks out his hand.

“Give me a poem.”

“What?”

“A poem. Find one in the book and give it to me.”

“Uhhh...” Wilbur’s brow furrows, and he looks down at the book in front of him. It’s still sticky, still coffee-stained and dog-eared.

He flips through it until he finds a poem he vaguely recognizes from class, then spins the book and shoves it across the table. The pink-haired boy catches it, pulls it closer, and reads.

“‘When I Have Fears’?”

“It’s a poem, innit?”

“Course. You know what it’s about?”

“Some dude’s scared of dying before he can do shit, is basically what my professor said.”

Pink-hair shook his head. “That’s the beginning, I s’pose. But by the end he doesn’t think that anymore.” With a flip of the book cover, English Major closes the textbook. He leans back in his chair, and his eyes are calculative—studying—when he looks at Wilbur. “Love and fame and rushing to get everything done is meaningless, in the end. Everything leads up to death, and after death it’s not like you’re gonna be around to experience much, now are you? Basically, he’s saying that while these things are cool, whether he experiences them or not doesn’t mean anything in the end. Death and time eat everything. So what’s the point in worrying about it?”

Wilbur frowns. “That’s a bit... bleak.”

“Not really. Not to him, at least. It’s reassuring.”

For a moment, they stare at each other. There’s chatter all around them, the cafeteria slowly filling up as it ticks further and further past noon. Finally, English Major breaks the silence.

“Anyway, I just came over to tell you to stop ruining my books. Believe it or not, I also don’t like spendin’ all my money on buying the textbooks, so...”

He gets up to leave, or maybe to get food and sit down somewhere, since he hadn’t had anything when he sat down with Wilbur. Before he can get further than two steps, though, Wilbur calls out to him.

“Hey!”

He turns back.

“I still don’t totally agree with you. And you’re kinda a dick. Real stuck-up prick. You should consider dropping the know-it-all attitude.”

The boy snorts. Wilbur continues with the question he really wants to ask. “What’s your name?”

“... I’m Techno. Yours?”

“Wilbur.”

“It was a real displeasure to meet you, Wilbur,” Techno says.

“It was a displeasure to meet you, too. I’ll make sure to put hot sauce on my next book, special for you.”

Techno grimaces, and Wilbur cackles.

The next day, they sit together in the cafeteria. And the day after that. And the day after that. And *huh*, Wilbur thinks on the fifth day, sitting across from Techno as he rants about how the modern publishing industry is ruining good fiction. He thinks he might have made a friend.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

The child has been spotted...

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I don’t understand.”

Wilbur scowls as Techno, sitting across from him at their usual spot in the cafeteria, huffs a long, drawn-out sigh.

“*What?*” Wilbur asks, shoving his poetry textbook across the table. It spins once before colliding with Techno’s elbow. “How am *I* supposed to write one of these? Especially a sonnet. Sonnets are fucking awful.”

“That’s fair.”

“See!”

Techno chuckles, and Wilbur leans back in his chair, momentarily gratified by Techno’s agreement. It’d been three weeks, and as exams approached, their lunches had been infiltrated by homework more and more often. Today’s struggle was Wilbur’s British Literature class poetry assignment. They were supposed to take a poem they’d read in class and write another one, inspired by it, in the same style. Problem was, Wilbur had no fucking clue how to write a poem.

“So pick one that’s free verse.” Techno shrugs. “There’s gotta be one in here.”

Wilbur shakes his head. “You’d think that, wouldn’t you? But my professor said we can only use a poem we’ve discussed in class, and I swear he chose to talk about *solely* formal verse poems on purpose.”

Techno pulls Wilbur’s book closer and starts flipping through it. “Does the poem you write have to be the same theme as the one you choose?”

“No, but it has to be the same style.”

“So choose a short one.”

“Please find me a ‘short one’ out of all the ones we bookmarked. I’m telling you, Techno, he did this *on purpose*.”

Techno laughs, then shuts the book and pushes it back to Wilbur's side of the table. He'd hardly looked through it, but Wilbur figures he'd probably gotten the point he was trying to make, which was that *his professor is a total and complete arse*.

"You should come with me to Professor Watson's office hours. He could probably help you out."

Oh god, not this again. Wilbur rolls his eyes. Techno practically worships this man. Whenever the topic of teachers comes up in their conversations, Dr. Watson—or Phil, as he apparently encourages his students to call him—is always the first to be name-dropped. Supposedly, he's one of the top professors in the English literature department. Wilbur's never had him, but, then again, Wilbur's only taken one literature class before the one he's in now, and that was three long semesters ago, in high school. Now he's a second semester sophomore in university, and all the dusty poetry books he'd immediately donated to Goodwill post-graduation have come back to haunt him.

"I'm not going to your oh-so-beloved professor's office hours," Wilbur says, for what he can only imagine is the ten hundredth time, "but thanks."

"You'd *like* him! He makes literature interesting..."

Anything else Techno says is dead and drowned to Wilbur's ears as his gaze slides over Techno's shoulder, bored, and he catches sight of someone sitting—hunchbacked and wearing the brightest red hoodie he's ever seen in his life—across the cafeteria. The person wouldn't have caught his eye if not for two things. One, the said bright red hoodie (seriously, it was like it'd been dyed in highlighter ink). Two, the fact that, even though the guy was tall—his gangly legs awkwardly tucked beneath his plastic chair—he was a *child*. It was obvious. If not by the baby fat still stubbornly clinging to his cheeks, or the neon blue braces that Wilbur could tell the color of from all the way across the cafeteria, then it was the L'Manberg High School pin still attached to his backpack, and the familiar blue and red lanyard around his neck. Wilbur knows that school. Wilbur had *gone* to that school.

Wilbur also knows everyone who'd gone there despised it and would rather drop dead than be caught wearing anything even vaguely tied back to it. Everyone, that is, except for the people still trapped there.

The boy's a high-schooler.

What is a high-schooler doing in a university cafeteria?

"Wilbur? Earth to Wilbur. Houston, do you read me?"

Wilbur waves a hand in front of his face distractedly. "*Shhh*. Stop. Do you see that kid over there?"

The kid's blond. Curly wisps fall in front of his face as he uses his fork to aggressively attack the plate of steaming pot roast in front of him. His cheeks are tinged pink, and there's a phone in his left hand that he keeps looking over at after every bite. His legs jitter underneath the chair.

“Is that a kid?” Techno asks, and Wilbur’s eyes snap back to where Techno’s rotated a full one-eighty in his chair to stare at the boy.

“Hey!” Wilbur snaps. “Don’t stare! He’s gonna *see* you.”

Techno either doesn’t hear or doesn’t listen, because he continues, “What is a kid doing here? Isn’t he s’posed to be in school?”

The kid looks up, and both Wilbur and Techno immediately duck their heads away.

“Maybe he’s dual credit,” Wilbur whispers, conspiratorially.

“He looks like a middle schooler,” Techno whispers back.

“Pfft, no. The lanyard’s from my old high school.”

“That’s even worse. A high-schooler?”

“High schoolers aren’t that bad.”

“No. They’re *terrifying*. College kids can bully you and you laugh it off cause they’ve probably switched majors ten times in the past two months. But high-schoolers? They find what you’re really insecure about and exploit it. They’re like... they’re like emotional bloodhounds or somethin’. And I’m not even gettin’ into their hormones. Or mood swings.” Techno pauses for a moment, and Wilbur raises his eyes from the table to look at him. “I was a terrible high schooler,” Techno admits.

“So was I.”

They both shudder.

When Wilbur stretches up again after a minute’s passed, the boy is gone.

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Tommy Crazy Danger Kraken Innit prides himself on his superb state of intelligence. He’s a solid B-C student, which he considers *much* better than having straight A’s, because *Ranboo* has straight A’s, and Ranboo’s a bitch. Tommy likes being a little more average: The People’s Student, some might say.

He won second place in his English class poetry competition, once. It was just for fun, and organized entirely last minute, but he’d walked out of it ten bucks richer. Thanks, Mr. Nicholson.

He participates in band, playing the trumpet and occasionally being forced into itchy uniforms that, somehow, are *always* fucking black. AKA the *worst* color to stand outside in the sun for half the day wearing.

*“Black absorbs heat,”* his sixth grade teacher told his general science class, once. He'd only been half paying attention. Beside him, Tubbo was trying to figure out which chemicals mixed together would make their glass vial explode the fastest. *“Sort of like a sponge. It saps it all up.”*

Tommy saps things up like a sponge, too. It's how he's so smart. It's how he knows, at seventeen years old, that the “chicken” on his tray is not actually chicken, but some sort of mishmash between beef and mashed fish. It's how he knows that, two miles down the road, there's a college whose cafeteria is right at the front of campus. It's how he knows that, around noon, rush-hour begins and the cafeteria teems with so many college students that it's virtually impossible to single him out as the only high-schooler there. It's how he knows there's an exit door next to the cafeteria's main entrance that only opens from the inside, and that, if he waits long enough, someone will walk out and he can catch the door before it closes. It's how he knows that it's quite possible—infrigoratingly *easy*, in fact—to break into a college cafeteria.

Tommy smiles at a red-headed girl as she pushes the exit door open. He holds it for her, and she thanks him politely as she brushes past.

He slips inside.

The cafeteria at Essempi University, in comparison to L'Manberg High's, is like Paris' Eiffel Tower compared to the LA version. They're the same basic concept, but one is the most valuable monument in all of Europe while the other is where people go if they want to pretend they're in the city of love when they're really in a city overflowing with garbage, gambling, and drugs. Not that Tommy's against any of those things, necessarily. He's rooted through garbage cans, before, when he dropped something in there he shouldn't have, and he's definitely not against a little gambling. He snorted a line of vitamin C powder once, though—Tubbo's idea—and after sneezing up orange dust for the next hour and a half, he decided that if drugs worked the same way, they weren't for him.

Either way, it doesn't matter because this cafeteria is *much* nicer than his high school's. He slips through the rows of people waiting in line for savory-smelling pastas, thick slabs of meat (that actually *look* like meat, thank god), and steamed vegetables. He snags a plate from the rack of dishes at the head of the counter. Then he fills it with as much food as he possibly can before crossing the cafeteria to take his usual spot next to the windows.

His spot is in a corner, purposefully, so that it's harder to spot him from the cafeteria entrance. Just in case the employees suddenly decide to find him and kick him out. He seriously doubts that will happen—they don't seem all too concerned with what the students do once they've passed the ID scanner—but just in case.

Tommy sighs as he sinks into his chair, tucking his legs underneath himself and placing his plate and fork on the table. He'd gotten chicken and waffles, today, drizzled (drowned) with honey-gold syrup and sprinkled with just the tiniest amount of powdered sugar. He'd dumped a nice scoopful of fresh blueberries beside the waffle, and finished the plate off with a chocolate chip cookie balanced precariously on the edge. It's maybe not the healthiest of meals, but Tommy's a growing boy, and hungry, and this is *so much better* than his cafeteria's mystery meat and rubbery vegetables.

He uses his fork to separate the chicken from the waffle, picks it up with his fingers, and goes to take a bite.

“Hello!”

Tommy yelps. He jumps, and the chicken in his hand goes dive-bombing back to his plate, smashing into the waffle and sending blueberries skittering off the side. He lunges to catch them before they can roll off the table, then looks up, glaring daggers at whoever decided to scare the ever-loving shit out of him while he’s *trying* to enjoy his lunch.

Two college students stare back at him.

They’re both tall. That’s the fact he realizes immediately, having to crane his neck to look at both of their faces. One has curly, brown hair and warm eyes to match it, although a deep scowl is set onto his face. The other has some sort of bubblegum-pink thing going on with his hair. It’s cropped short around his shoulders, and rectangular glasses perch on the edge of his nose, making him look like some sort of punk rock, hippie librarian. He’s also got a cardigan.

-10 *Intimidation Points*, Tommy thinks, even as ice cold panic shoots down his spine. Shit. He’s been caught.

Cardigan Boy steps closer. “What are you doin’ here?”

Tommy, as stated before, is in the possession of a superb state of intelligence. So, naturally, he shoves the blueberries he just caught into his mouth, chews thoughtfully, then replies, “Eatin’ me lunch. How 'bout you?”

For a moment, the two teenagers stare blankly at him. Then the brown-haired one steps forward, yanks out the chair across from him, and sits down.

“Ey! Whaddafuck?” Tommy splutters over mashed blueberry in his mouth as the teen settles himself at Tommy’s table. After a second, Cardigan Boy joins him. Tommy didn’t *ask* them to sit down, thank you very much—

“You’re, like, fourteen,” Bushy-Haired Boy observes. He’s got glasses too; round, silver ones that do nothing to hide the way his brown eyes sparkle deviously behind them. “What are you doing in a college cafeteria?”

“I am *not* fourteen.”

“You look fourteen.” Cardigan Boy shrugs.

Tommy scowls. “I’m not.”

“How old are you, then?”

Returning his attention to Bushy-Haired Boy, Tommy says the first non-high school age he can think of. “Twenty-one.”



Immediately after, warm satisfaction sinks over him and he leans back, grinning. Twenty-one, in his humble opinion, is the perfect age. You can drink, you can drive, you can leave the country. You're old enough that people treat you like an adult, but young enough not to have all those health issues old people complain about. Yet.

Cardigan Boy scoffs. "Well now we *know* you're not in college. You're fifteen, tops."

Tommy, high-school senior, lets his mouth fall open. "Bitch. I'm seventeen!"

And the truth spills out.

Cardigan Boy sits back, satisfied, as Tommy's eyes blow wide. Fuck. He wasn't supposed to have said that.

Bushy-Haired Boy leans back as well, crossing his arms over his chest and regarding Tommy with a tilted head and tiny grin. It's patronizing, and makes Tommy feel like a zoo animal being watched through a glass cage. He makes sure to glare back extra hard.

"What are you doing out of school, kid?"

"I just told you. I'm eating me lunch. Or I *was*, until you and Cardigan Boy over here decided to interrupt. Do you even know how rude that is?"

"Why do you keep saying 'me'?" Cardigan Boy asks.

"Sounds better, innit?"

"It's grammatically incorrect."

"It's British, actually."

That earns a laugh from the brown-haired boy, and Tommy has to duck his head and pretend to stab another blueberry with his fork in order not to let his own smile show. Bushy-Haired Boy was like him. He can hear the accent, heavy and thick—if a little more posh than his own—sitting in the back of the boy's throat.

"I'm Wilbur," Bushy-Haired Boy finally introduces himself. Tommy looks up to see that his eyes are sparkling again, winking with amusement in cafeteria lighting. "This is Techno. Did you sneak in here?"

"If I did, are you ratting me out?"

"No. Mostly because I would also love to get free food by sneaking in. And partially because you're a bit of a brat, and I like that."

Tommy tilts his head. "I'm not a brat. I'm a genius."

Cardigan boy—Techno—bursts out laughing. Wilbur just grins wider.

"*What?* I am!" Tommy scowls, offended.

“Sure you are, gremlin,” Wilbur says. And then, “What’s your name?”

Tommy Crazy Danger Kraken Innit is not forcefully ejected from the cafeteria, that day. Nor the day after, when Wilbur and Techno catch him again. Instead, he finds his solo lunches become a trio, and suddenly, before he’s really wrapped his head around it, he’s friends with two college sophomores. They’re crazy. They talk about literature and music like it’s more than just wrinkly paper and systematically plunked music notes. They pour over textbooks like they’re Bibles, and crack awful jokes about both historical and modern politics (through this, Tommy finds out Wilbur has the entirety of 'Hamilton' the musical memorized). They make smoothies that look like day-old cat vomit out of their leftover food and dare each other to drink them. They try to trip each other on their way out of the cafeteria, and make a game out of who can stack their plates the highest. They're weird, and nerdy, and frequently make fun of Tommy for being a child. He hates them, he really does.

Somewhere along the line, they become his best friends.

## Chapter End Notes

Back by popular demand, "L Is for (Loser) Literature" is becoming a longfic :)

//

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# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

“I’ll have you know I’m very mature for my age—”

Techno turns in his seat to give him a deadpan stare. It doesn’t really work, because his hair is still going everywhere and it gets in his eyes, but the effort is there. “Says the kid who stuck two straws up his nose at lunch today, then used them to blow bubbles in his chocolate milk.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Something has been going on with Techno.

It starts the first Friday Techno doesn’t show up to office hours. It’s going on five p.m., and still there is no sign of pink hair, rectangle glasses, or even the barest hint of a plaid over-shirt lingering outside Phil’s office. He waits thirty long minutes—aimlessly stacking and re-stacking papers that have long-since been graded, updating his planner for the coming month, dusting his shelves and pushing all his loose books back into place. Phil “lightly cleans” his office like no man has ever lightly cleaned before. And still, at the end of those thirty minutes, Techno has not shown.

Phil leaves his office on time, for once, and thinks about how wrong it feels the whole way home.

The following Monday, Techno shows up ten minutes past his usual time.

“Techno,” Phil says, perking up the moment Techno pokes his head inside, “I was wondering when you’d get here. Ten whole minutes late!”

It’s a joke. Ten minutes is hardly late, and office hours are meant to be a “pop-in at your convenience” type thing anyway. Phil only says it because he’s used to Techno showing up exactly at five o’clock. He’s used to the pink-haired-kid slipping into his office just as the sun begins to set outside; used to him sprawling out across the leather chair on the other side of his desk; used to him plopping his backpack on the floor and asking, “So, Phil? How was comp class today?” (The freshmen are entertainment for them both, at this point. The question is a running joke).

It’s a joke, but Techno takes it seriously.

“Sorry,” he says, brushing his hands off on his jeans. There’s dirt on them, Phil realizes. It’s on Techno’s hands and smudged across the knees of his jeans. “I just came back from the woods.”

“The woods?”

Techno nods, throwing himself into the leather chair. “Wilbur took us along the garden paths out there. Called it ‘Obligatory Vitamin D Day.’”

Phil squints. “Wilbur? I thought you hated that guy. And... *us*?”

“It’s... a lot to explain,” Techno says. He’s wearing his backpack, and he twists to dig around inside it while he speaks. “But I have homework questions, now. Can you help with that first?”

By the time they make it through the questions on Techno’s Intro to Philosophy worksheet, it’s going on six thirty p.m. and Kristin has started texting him.

They put a pin in the ‘*us*’ conversation for another day.

For the next few days, Techno shows up as usual. Then, a week and a half after Techno first started acting weird, he shows up flushed and looking like he ran a hundred miles.

“Whoa, mate. Where’d you come from in such a hurry?” Phil asks as Techno strips his bag off and drops into the chair.

“Wilbur’s. He’s doing some poetry thing and asked me to help. I told him to come with me to your office hours, but he wouldn’t, and we spent a whole half hour arguing about it before I realized I was gonna be late. Did you know Wilbur’s dorm is all the way on the opposite end of campus? And no buses run at five? Why the hell do no buses run at five? That doesn’t even make any *sense*, Phil. Does that make any sense to you?”

Phil stares at him for a long, silent moment. Then, “Can you back up a little bit? ...What?”

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Techno explains. He explains the cafeteria and the sticky books. The music major. The cat-vomit smoothies and homework sessions that have bled outside the confining lines of the cafeteria and into his everyday life. He explains Tommy—because he knows Phil won’t care about a high-schooler ditching his school’s cruddy lunch—and how he somehow weaseled his way into their little group.

Somewhere in the middle of his explanation, Techno realizes he has *friends* now. Real ones. Ones that aren’t old friends from high school—barely keeping up over Discord—or Phil. He’s made his first real college friends. And it only took him... three semesters and a pile of syrupy books to get there.

He knows he shouldn’t be too excited. This is Wilbur Soot, book-destroyer extraordinaire, and Tommy Innit, certified child, he’s talking about. But something warm and enthusiastic swells in his chest as he explains their latest escapade around campus. It feels a little like affection.

Phil nods along as he explains, letting him go on about *Hamilton* music and sonnets written for literature classes and how “actually, pretty good” Wilbur is on the guitar. He sits and listens patiently as Techno complains about Tommy stealing his cake in the cafeteria for the third day in a row, and how he’s concerned (read: extreme sarcasm) that he doesn’t have parents.

When Techno finishes, he’s met with a bright smile and knowing eyes.

“So what I’m hearing is, you made friends?”

“Yeah,” Techno says. Yeah. He supposes he did.

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“Do you have friends?”

They’re rumbling along the road that connects to the interstate leading away from campus—windows down and pop rock guitar music softened to a faint buzz. The wind is blowing Techno’s hair *everywhere*. He looks like a cotton ball that’s been anxiously plucked at until tufts stick out every which way. It’s a miracle he manages to get the question out around all that flying hair.

Tommy scoffs from the backseat of Wilbur’s truck. “Of course I have friends. You think I’d just get in the back of a *stranger*’s car—”

“No, no. Not us. Like, friends your age.”

“You and Wil basically *are* my age.

“... Friends that are as immature as you.”

“Take that back!”

Wilbur snickers from the drivers seat, mumbling something about how “you’ve really done it now, Techno,” but Tommy ignores him. He leans forward in his seat, sticking his head between Wilbur in the driver’s seat and Techno riding shotgun.

“I’m only three years younger. And not even for that long! I’ll be eighteen by the end of spring semester!”

“That speaks nothing of your maturity levels...”

“I’ll have you know I’m very mature for my age—”

Techno turns in his seat to give him a deadpan stare. It doesn’t really work, because his hair is still going everywhere and it gets in his eyes, but the effort is made. “Says the kid who stuck two straws up his nose at lunch today, then used them to blow bubbles in his chocolate milk.”

“You totally would have joined me if you weren’t such a *pussy*.”

“No I wouldn’t have! That’s disgusting! It’s literally like blowing your nose into your drink.”

“It’s not like I drank it afterwards, now did I?”

“No. You tried to make *Wilbur* drink it.”

Wilbur takes the next left at an intersection, turning off onto the road running parallel to their town’s major river. Tommy catches a glimpse of the Gate Bridge up ahead—brown and wooden, leading across the river and to the park enshrouded by trees on the other side—before it disappears behind apartments and restaurants whizzing past.

“What—ever. Where are we going?”

“We aren’t *going* anywhere,” Wilbur finally speaks up. He takes another left, swinging them onto a street running parallel to Essemi University. “Haven’t you ever been on a ‘drive’ before?”

“Of course I’ve been on a drive. But the point of getting in a car is to *go* somewhere. There’s always a destination.”

Wilbur scoffs. “You can’t just enjoy the journey?”

“Oh don’t start getting all phil-o-soft-ical on me now, dickhead.”

“Wanna try that big word again?” Techno asks.

Tommy kicks the back of Techno’s seat and purposefully does *not* try the word again. “Can we at least pick up ice cream?”

“That’s such a child thing to say,” Techno sighs, but Wilbur cuts the insult off before Tommy can snap back.

“Ice cream actually sounds fucking fantastic right now. Niki’s?”

Everyone in the tiny, upper west section of New York knew Niki’s Ice-Cream. It was a fan favorite among people at Tommy’s school—partially because of the ice cream, and partially because of the college students that always went there. People at Tommy’s school loved to pretend they were cool by hanging out where Essempi students hung out. Elitist, in Tommy’s opinion. He—similar to the reason he broke into Essemi University’s cafeteria every afternoon—just went for the good food.

“Yes!” Tommy cheers, and his grin matches Wilbur’s as they take a right turn toward Niki’s.

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Niki's Ice-Cream doubled as a café, and was situated on the very edge of campus. It used to be a diner, so padded booths, spinning barstools, and checkerboard flooring made up the interior dining room. Niki's parents had modernized it a bit by adding hanging plants, and stringing up glowing fairy lights that lit the ceiling at night like stars. The 1950's touch still remained, though. And, much to Tommy's personal satisfaction, they'd never gotten rid of the little record player housed at the back.

Wilbur enters the shop first, and Tommy scurries in behind him.

The shop is set up like a big L. The entrance drops them at the bottom tip, and then the counter rounds the corner and continues back to the register at the far end. The record player is back there, as well as the door to the restrooms. Along the opposite wall, cherry red booths line the glass windows. Smaller tables speckle the inside flooring, their metal chairs screeching as Tommy pushes them out of the way to get to the back register.

"Niki!" he calls. There's a bright silver service bell beside the register, and he repeatedly presses down on it.

"Tommy," Wilbur hisses, yanking his hand away from the bell. "Stop. Whoever's here will \_\_\_"

"I'll be right with you!"

Tommy slinks away from the bell, ignoring Wilbur's eyes still narrowed at him as he migrates to the glass ice cream case. It's huge, spanning almost the entire long side of the counter. But, to be fair, it's not *all* ice cream. Niki's shop also sells sorbet.

*"It's for people who are lactose intolerant,"* she'd told him, once.

*"The vegans,"* he'd replied.

*"No, Tommy, there's a difference between lactose intolerant and vegan—"*

*"You're feeding the vegans."*

Tommy, for no particular reason, hated vegans. They were mortal enemies, you could say.

"Right. What'll it be for you— oh." Niki steps out of the back kitchen and freezes.

Tommy grins. "Hey Niki!" he greets, but she's not looking at him. Instead, her gaze is pinned on Techno at the front of the shop.

"You," she says lowly.

"Ah... heyyy Niki," Techno responds. He awkwardly shuffles further into the parlor. "I didn't know you worked here."

"It's my parent's shop. My name is on the sign."

"Your first name. There could be tons of other Nikis."

“You know each other?” Tommy cuts in.

For the first time, Niki’s attention falls to him. Her face softens minusculely.

“Yeah,” she says, “Techno’s a regular at the library, and I work there on week days.”

Tommy opens his mouth to ask another question, but Wilbur’s already talking over him.

“Is he a bitch to you about the books, too?”

“Well— I mean—”

“Niki, this is the man who keeps dribbling all over your library books,” Techno interrupts.

Wilbur rears back. “I don’t do it on purpose!”

“Except for when you do.”

“Who cares!”

Tommy clears his throat, but Techno and Wilbur ignore him, still squabbling. Bitches. They’re only a couple years older than him, and yet they think being in college gives them speaking rights?

Fed up with their bullshit, and tired of not being able to talk, Tommy reaches across the counter and smacks the service bell as hard as he can, repeatedly, until the two boys’ arguing dies down to smothered embers.

The silence rings out—literally—in the shop. Finally, Tommy can speak.

“Fucking hell,” he mutters, “shut up about your stupid literature, will you? We came here for ice-cream.”

“Uh, yeah,” Niki says, clearing her throat behind the counter, “what would you like, by the way? Your usual?”

“Yes please.”

Tommy can be polite when he wants to be. He waits patiently as Niki grabs a scooper and douses it in warm water. She slides open the glass case and reaches down to the cookie dough flavor. As she works, quickly filling a large cone, Tommy uses the silence he’s created to catch up with her.

“How’re your uni classes?” he asks, hopping up onto one of the barstools and leaning his elbows against the cool countertop.

Niki smiles as she curls a scoop from the bin. “Pretty good, actually. I got some new plants from my horticulture course. They’re hanging up just there, see?”



Tommy follows Niki's pointed finger up to three pots of some long, vine-y plant hanging from the ceiling. Niki—certified Horticulture Student TM—has gotten good at chaining her plant pots onto hooks drilled into the ceiling, and so half the ice-cream shop looks more like a plant nursery.

Frankly, he's not sure that's a health services certified practice. But he's not about to complain when it makes the parlor look so homey.

Niki passes his ice-cream over the counter, and he manages a quick thanks before digging in.

"Who's paying for this?" Techno asks after Wilbur's ordered.

"Well, you're last, so..." Wilbur rolls off as Niki hands him his cone. It's some weird, bright blue flavor.

Tommy takes a seat at one of the booths, and Wilbur slides in across from him.

"What flavor is that?" Tommy asks between licks of his own cone. "It looks like neon blue shit."

Wilbur gasps, affronted. "It's *Cookie Monster*. Don't tell me you've never had it."

Tommy shakes his head.

"It's basically cookie dough," Wilbur continues with a shrug. "It's normally vanilla ice-cream with cookie dough and Oreos in it, but this place adds brownies to it, too. Wanna try?"

Wilbur tilts his cone toward Tommy, and no, Tommy does not want to try the disgusting mess of blue highlighter ice-cream stuck to Wilbur's cone. But it's already melting—the sun from the window making the liquid glisten as it slides toward the edge—and it's going to fall on the table if *someone* doesn't lick it.

Tommy leans forward and takes a huge chomp out of Wilbur's ice-cream.

"What the fuck?" Wilbur says, eyes widening as Tommy chews considerably. "You just *bit* my ice-cream!"

"How else 'm I s'posed ta get all da favors?"

Techno plops down beside Wilbur, making the booth jolt. He, at least, has a normal colored cone. It's some form of chocolate ice-cream covered with rainbow sprinkles.

Tommy swallows. "Not bad. I give it a C on the tier list."

"What's the tier list?" Techno asks.

"You know. Like, the *tier list*. Ranking stuff from S to F."

Wilbur takes another lick of his ice-cream, which has a huge, Tommy-sized crater in it now. "I know the tier list," he says, "but I don't agree with you. Cookie Monster is clearly an S."

“Why does it start with S?” Techno asks. He’s nicer when there’s ice-cream in front of his face, Tommy’s beginning to learn. More polite. Maybe they should come here more often.

“Because S is superior,” he says. “What flavor did you get?”

“Rocky Road.”

“F tier,” Tommy and Wilbur say simultaneously.

As they burst into matching giggles, Techno scowls. “Why do I get an F? Rocky Road is good—a staple flavor. Wilbur’s looks like dog vomit.”

“But at least mine doesn’t have nuts in it.”

Tommy shakes his head in dismay. “Whoever decided to start adding nuts into ice-cream was \_\_\_”

“Let me guess, ‘nuts’,” Techno cuts in.

“I was gonna say *a bitch*, but okay Poetry Boy. At least you put sprinkles on it.”

“What about Cookie Dough,” Wilbur asks, cutting off the banter before it can go too far. “Where would you put that on the tier list?”

“I’d give it a D, personally,” Techno says. “The dough inside it just isn’t my thing.”

“S tier, obviously.” Tommy shrugs.

“I think an A or a B. Maybe a B plus.”

“There are no pluses or minuses, Wilbur...”

For a couple minutes they sit in silence, all slurping cones that had started melting while they talked. Niki had disappeared from behind the counter, but Tommy can hear her rustling somewhere in the back room. Outside the window, Tommy can look across the parking lot and see the sun starting to set. Streaks of crimson, rosemary, and gold halo the tree-line across the street, making the thick grove of pines look like it’s on fire.

When Tommy turns back to the table, Techno and Wilbur are still talking about tier lists.

“We should start tier listing our college experiences,” Wilbur is saying with a snicker. “Personally, I give my college algebra class a solid F.”

Techno groans. “Can I give my biology class an F, too? I thought it’d be the easiest science.”

“You should have taken horticulture. I’m taking it next semester. You could have taken it now, then given me all the answers.”

“I’m fairly certain that’s cheating, Wilbur. It’s against Academic Integrity.”

“I rate Academic Integrity a D on the college experiences tier list.”

Techno rolls his eyes.

“D’you know my teacher wants me to enroll dual credit here?” Tommy asks. It’s a little out of the blue, but his teacher had mentioned it today, and he hadn’t even had a chance to talk about it with his parents yet. If he didn’t say something soon, he was going to explode.

“Really?” Techno asks, and his face is a lot more skeptical than Wilbur’s, who looks thrilled.

“You should!” Wilbur says. “L’Manburg High sucks. Essempi is way cooler. I could have saved myself a lot of hassle if I’d just done dual credit for like... two years before coming here. I probably wouldn’t have had to take this stupid British Literature class.”

Tommy hums. “I haven’t asked my parents yet, but my math teacher told me I could join for some of the eight-week courses. Just one or two. Since it’s already a month into this semester, he didn’t want me to join the sixteen-week classes late.”

“That makes sense.” Wilbur nods.

Techno hums in agreement.

They’re down to the last few bites of their ice-cream cones. Tommy finishes his off first, then laughs and bats Techno’s hand away when he tries to shove a napkin in his face. He cleans his chin on his sleeve instead, and can’t help the snort that escapes when Techno’s face screws up.

“Do you do this in front of your mother?” Techno asks, and Tommy wheezes.

“Can I get out of the booth for a sec?” Wilbur asks, interrupting. “I’m gonna use the restroom.”

Techno nods, hurriedly scooting out of the booth so Wil can hop out. Once he’s gone, he sits back down and rests his elbows on the sticky tabletop.

It’s quiet without Wil.

It’s not like Tommy and Techno don’t get along—no matter how much shit they give each other, Tommy knows Techno likes him, and he looks up to Techno a lot. Out of the three of them, Techno’s the one who seems to have his life together the most. He knows who he is and what he wants to do, and sticks to it. Tommy respects that; especially as a high school senior who doesn’t even know what he wants to major in yet.

It’s just a little intimidating, sometimes.

“So,” Techno begins, tapping his fingers against the table, “what classes would you want to take for dual credit?”

Tommy fidgets in the booth. “I dunno. My math teacher, Mr. Sam, recommended the basics. ‘Core classes,’ I think he called them? Like college algebra and English composition and... all that shit.”

“That’s probably the smartest way to go. You could also take an elective class or something, though. Maybe try and figure out what you like and don’t like?”

Tommy shrugs. “I could.”

There’s an awkward silence, and then,

“What *do* you like?”

It’s weird. This isn’t the first time Tommy’s been asked the dreaded, three word question (Or four, technically. The first word’s a contraction): “What’s your major?” But it’s the first time Techno or Wilbur’s asked. Granted, Techno doesn’t use the standard words. But, fundamentally, the question is the same.

“Well...” Tommy shifts again. He’s not uncomfortable, but this is the same question he’s gotten over and over again from his parents, his teachers, his friends. He’s a senior. He should *know*, shouldn’t he? “I applied to colleges under undecided, but... I like film?”

Techno squints. “Is that a question or an answer?”

“Answer,” Tommy states more confidently. “I do like film. I just also like a lot of other things.”

“Like what?”

“Graphic design. Public speech. I thought about being a comedian, once.”

Techno snorts, and Tommy feels his face start to flush red with embarrassment before he says, “That fits you surprisingly well, actually.”

The blush instantly changes to one of pride. “Thanks,” he mutters, ducking his head to hide it. “My friends thought it was dumb.”

“Then you have dumb friends.”

Not really, Tommy thinks to himself. Actually, as a possessor of superb intelligence, he’s smart enough to recognize that his friends are quite possibly *smarter* than him. Both Ranboo and Tubbo are straight-A students, top of their classes, set to graduate with 4.0 GPAs. Tubbo applied to five ivy-leagues, Ranboo to three. Tubbo wants to focus on biochemistry in college, with a potential minor in business, while Ranboo’s end goal is radio producing. They’re smart. Ridiculously smart. And it’s not that they treat him like he’s dumb. They don’t. It’s just that they make him feel small, sometimes, by comparison.

They laughed when he said he wanted to be a comedian, and, yes, they’d thought it was a joke. They’d apologized as soon as he didn’t laugh with them. But it still hurt a little to know that their first reaction was one of disbelief.

“Move over, nerd. I’m back.”

Tommy blinks out of his momentary slump as Wilbur rejoins them at the booth. He scoots in beside Techno, whacking him until he moves closer to the window, and the quiet solemnity zaps from the atmosphere.

Once he's situated, Wilbur leans his back against the booth and closes his eyes. "Wake me up in two years, once I've graduated."

"You still have to drive Tommy home."

Wilbur groans. "*Technoooo*, you have a license."

"I have a license too," Tommy says. "I could drive us."

"*No*," Wilbur and Techno say in synch.

"I would like to make it back to my dorm and finish my paper *alive*, thank you very much," Techno tacks on. But he says it fondly.

It's the same as it always is. The Essempi cafeteria table has become a booth at Niki's Ice-Cream, but the dynamic doesn't change. They pick on each other and argue about ice-cream and tier lists but, at the end of the day, the two college students sitting across from Tommy are probably two of the very few people he can tolerate. Coincidentally, they are also some of the very few people that can tolerate *him*. They get him. They just... fit. Like pieces of the same puzzle.

They're a little like his older brothers, he decides.

"Are you actually tired?" Techno asks Wilbur a moment later.

Wilbur squeezes his eyes shut again, so tightly that Tommy bets he's seeing stars, then opens them.

"No. It's fine. I can drive," he sighs. "Let's go, though. As much as I'd like to procrastinate it, I do need to study for my college algebra quiz tomorrow."

They head out around six, waving bye to Niki as they go—even Techno. Wilbur's car is parked in the far corner of the lot, so Tommy races both Techno and Wil to get there. Well, "races" isn't quite the right word. *He* runs while Techno and Wil lag behind, refusing to pick up the pace.

After a long battle of Who Gets Shotgun, Tommy loses a match of Rock Paper Scissors and is confined yet again to the backseat. He and Techno hop in, and while Wil drags himself into the drivers seat and wearily starts the engine, Tommy takes a moment to think about that three word question, again. But in Techno's words.

What does he like?

He thinks he really likes this.

## Chapter End Notes

:') the found family dynamic is really hittin rn...

//

comments and kudos are always appreciated!! <3

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# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

He's going to have to call his mom. It sucks, mostly because he already knows what the news will be. He can judge it from the top message alone, and how many times she's already said that same thing to him. Still nothing. It was always nothing. Wilbur had been dealt a shit hand at life since he was young, but it hadn't actually gotten bad until the past few years. That's when they realized how actually bad it was, and tried to fix it. Figures his shit luck wouldn't let that happen.

## Chapter Notes

quick cw for mentions of illness

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur likes college.

The first time he thinks it, he's a scrawny freshman sitting on the edge of his freshly made dorm bed. His roommate is off with friends, getting drunk or high (Who knows which it actually is. Wilbur can't find it in him to care) before heading to his girlfriend's apartment, and so Wilbur has the room to himself for the night. It's not the first time. It won't be the last. He thought he'd feel lonely, and he does—a little. But more so he's at peace.

He sits with his guitar in his lap, quietly plucking the strings as crickets chirp outside his first floor window, and he thinks: *I like this*.

He likes campus. It's pretty, and there are plenty of trees to climb, benches to sit on, little nooks to hide out in. There's a nature trail winding off into the thick forest behind campus, and he likes to walk it when he's not feeling tired, or in pain.

He's been tired and in pain a lot more, recently.

He tries not to let it show.

There's a coffee shop on the second floor of the student center, and he likes it there. It's got sleek wooden tables, windows opening out to a view of the main quad, and jazzy low-fi music is constantly on loop. On a typical day, he walks in, buys himself a latte, heads out to the balcony and sits down to do homework (Or to people watch. Mostly people watch. He's an S tier fan of procrastination).

Until this semester, it's just been him visiting the shop. Now Techno comes along. They sit on the balcony and play what Tommy's referred to as "The Name Game," where they studiously observe each person walking through the quad and decide on a fitting name for them. Techno's personal favorite was Bartholemieu. Wilbur named someone Worm.

He likes that. Even when the caffeine makes his already abnormal heart rhythm fluctuate. Even when he has to sit down while walking back to the dorm, waving Techno's concern away as he explains, "I'm anemic. It's just the sun and caffeine making my dizziness worse."

It's a half-truth. But Techno believes it in full, and Wilbur doesn't really feel like explaining the rest.

He especially does not feel like explaining the rest to Tommy. Which is why, on February 14th when the three of them decide to go up to the coffee shop after lunch, he orders a lemonade instead of a latte.

"I hate Valentine's Day," Tommy is muttering when Wilbur joins them at a table inside. They chose the inside because it snowed the other day, and the melting ice outside had become a drip hazard over their usual spot.

"Why's that?" Wilbur asks, plopping into a chair.

"Yeah, Wife Haver," Techno says, already sipping on his mocha. "What about your multiple wives?"

Tommy takes a long sip of his chocolate chip frappé before responding. "Well you see, Techno Blade, *I* know I have multiple wives. But *they* can't seem to get it into their heads."

"Sounds sorta like The Merry Wives of Windsor," Techno comments.

"Ey?"

"It's a Shakespeare play. Don't worry. No one reads it."

"Except you. Because you're a nerd."

Techno either doesn't hear over the music or chooses not to respond, because he says nothing.

"Hey Wil. That girl over there is looking at you."

Wilbur looks up from his lemonade, meeting Tommy's mischievous eyes across the table. He jerks his head at some invisible spot over Wilbur's shoulder, and Wilbur turns to look.

Sure enough, when he spins around, the red-headed girl who'd taken his order is watching their group. She hurriedly looks away when Wilbur meets her gaze, but by that point it's too late. Tommy's already kicking his leg underneath the table.

Wilbur turns back around and yanks his leg away. "*What?*"



“She totally thinks you’re hot,” Tommy says, still grinning.

“*Tommy!*”

“Whaaaat? She keeps looking! Look! There! She’s doing it again!”

Wilbur can feel the flush building on his face, but he ignores Tommy’s directions and stubbornly does not turn to look again.

“She’s probably wondering why the fuck a high schooler’s sitting in her café,” he grumbles.

Tommy scowls. “Hey. I’m graduating in three months.”

“Yeah. Three *months*.”

“That’s soon.”

Wilbur clicks his mouth shut and decides not to argue.

For it being half-past twelve on a weekday, the café is pretty crowded. Wilbur would have thought more people would be eating lunch at the cafeteria, or still in class, but the tables around them are full. Warm heat pulses in from a vent over Wilbur’s head, and steady chatter is only overwhelmed by the occasional grinding of the café’s blender.

Normally, they wouldn’t come here right after lunch. But Tommy didn’t have to be back at school until one, and Techno’s next class was at three. Wilbur’s final class of the day—the dreaded British Literature course—started at two-thirty. They all had time to spare, so they’d decided to come grab drinks and chill for a bit.

Wilbur takes a sip of his lemonade as Tommy and Techno start a new conversation. It’s good. Sweet and sour in just the right places. Much better for him than the coffee, he’s sure.

He takes another sip.

He’s not in as much pain today as he was two days ago, which is nice. He was able to bypass the meds and go straight to his first class at eleven. He met Techno and Tommy in the cafeteria, and he hadn’t felt tired at all until now. This tiredness, at least, he could blame on food and the cold weather outside.

“Wilbur?”

Wilbur blinks back into reality just in time to see Techno wave a hand in front of his face.

“Earth to Wilbur. Wife Haver wants to know if you’re busy Saturday.”

“Saturday?” Wilbur frowns. He digs through his mental calendar, but the only notable event he can think of is on Sunday. “No? I don’t think so. Why?”

Tommy grins. He shoves a hand into his jeans pocket and wiggles it around until he finds what he’s looking for, then yanks it out. When his fist un-crumples, three, wrinkled slips of

paper are in the center.

“Is that garbage?”

“No!” Tommy retracts the pieces of paper back to his chest as if Wilbur had just scandalized the Crown Jewels. “They’re tickets to your school’s dumb football game. I bought them for me and my high school friends, Tubbo and Ranboo, but they got a last minute project sprung on them in Mrs. Devin’s history class and are *literally* in a race against time to complete it. So I thought... since there are three... we could go?”

It’s funny, Wilbur thinks. Even after all the time they’ve spent together in the past month, Tommy still looks at them like he expects them to up and leave at any given point in time. It’s like he thinks, just because he’s younger, he’ll never be as important to them. It’d be sad if it wasn’t incredibly *stupid*.

“Hell yeah, I’m in,” Wilbur says, and delights in the way Tommy’s face instantly brightens.

“I’ll come,” Techno also agrees. “I know nothing about sports, though. Just a warning.”

“It’s Saturday at five,” Tommy says, sliding a ticket across the table to Wil before handing the last one to Techno. “And, afterward, I was thinking. My mom’s making a late dinner, so if you want to come to my house, we could have food and hang out. We could play video games, too. If you want. I’ve got a bunch.”

“Do you have Mario Kart?” Wilbur asks.

“Oh I can *crush* you in Mario Kart,” Techno chimes in.

“I have Mario Kart, Halo, Portal, Half-Life 2, GTA, Minecraft—”

“Isn’t that game for adults only?” Techno asks.

“Minecraft?”

“No, GTA.”

“It’s seventeen plus.”

“You’re not plus.”

“Oh my *godddd* just let me play my illegal GTA, Techno. This is why we can’t have nice things—”

Wilbur is about to mentally clock out of the conversation and head back to his lemonade when there’s a tap on his shoulder, and the table falls silent. He turns around, and is met with the same red hair and blue eyes that’d been staring at him a minute ago.

“Um, sorry,” the girl says, freckled cheeks flushing red. “You just... you forgot your receipt.”

Her hand darts in front of Wil's face, armed with a tiny slip of register paper. He's lucky he doesn't get punched in the nose. He's also lucky he doesn't completely short circuit, because this girl is pretty. Like, he'd already secretly thought she was pretty when he was ordering, but now she's literally right in front of him—no cash register in the way—and she smells like fucking roses.

Who the fuck *actually* smells like roses?

"Oh," he says, and then cringes because it's probably the least-smart thing he's ever said. "Thank you."

The girl shifts awkwardly on her feet. Her hair's ridiculously long. Thick, curled ringlets brush her waist as she sways. "You're welcome. I'm Sally."

"I'm Wilbur."

"You're in my British Literature class, right? With Dr. Henning at two thirty?"

"I am?"

Okay, maybe *that* was the least-smart thing.

"I mean, yes. Yeah. I am. I am in that class. You're in that class?"

The girl—Sally—smiles. It's bright and brilliant, and probably the prettiest thing Wilbur's ever seen. Shit. Shit.

He can *feel* Tommy staring at him. He probably has a shit-eating grin on, too—the dickhead.

"Yeah, I sit in the back," Sally explains. "Have you started on the final poetry project?"

Wilbur shakes his head. "No. Have you?"

"No. I was planning to work on it sometime this coming week, though. I waited until last minute on the last one we did, and that was a mistake. Uh, would you want to meet up and work on it together?"

Is he being asked out right now? He has a feeling Tommy would say yes, he absolutely is being asked out. Techno might give him a slightly more practical answer. Something along the lines of, "Well, she might be asking you out, or she might just be getting her homework done."

"Y-yeah. Sure. I'd love to. The library?"

Sally nods. "Yeah. Here, I'll give you my number and, if you text me your name, I can put it in and then text you whenever I'm walking over there?" Her tone makes it sound more like it's a question, but Wilbur's used to these types of hesitant invitations. Thanks, Tommy.

"Yeah, that sounds perfect," he says, and her face has the exact same reaction Tommy's always does.

“Awesome! Okay! I’ll, uh, I’ll text you.”

She hands him his receipt and then, on the back of another piece of paper that she rips from the pad hanging off her apron, she scribbles what’s presumably her number and passes it to him. Wilbur takes both, and futilely prays his blush isn’t visible.

Sally leaves, and when Wilbur turns back to the table, he’s met with Tommy’s wide-eyed stare and Techno’s subtle grin.

“Did I just get asked on a date?” he asks first, when it’s apparent no one’s going to start talking before him.

Techno, predictably, shrugs. “Well, she might be ask—”

Tommy interrupts before he can get out the rest of his line. “Holy shit. I told you she thought you were h—”

Wilbur throws himself over the table to slam his hand over Tommy’s mouth. He can feel his face burning. This can’t be good for his blood pressure.

Tommy’s laughter under his palm is even worse.

“Shut up—!”

*“Ha ha ha ha!”*

---

Wilbur can’t concentrate for the entirety of his British Literature class, which is really a shame, because he sort of needs to learn this stuff now that he’s got a study date next week.

He’s just tired. He knows half his class is the same—can see the leftover hangovers on some of their faces. It doesn’t make him feel any better, though.

At some point, he puts his head in his hands and closes his eyes.

Next thing he knows, Sally is gently shaking him awake.

“Class is over,” she whispers. “Come on, before the professor realizes you slept through the whole thing.”

Wilbur yawns and pushes back from his chair. He lets Sally guide him through the swaths of people gathered at the front of the lecture hall, and through the exit door. Once they’re out in the hallway, she turns to look at him.

“Are you okay?”

Wilbur rubs his eyes. He feels a little better now that he's slept, so he doesn't really have to lie when he mumbles out, "Yeah. I'm fine."

Sally's frown deepens, but she doesn't press, which Wilbur is grateful for.

They take the elevators down to the first floor, and as they walk out into the sunshine, she asks which way he's going.

"I can walk with you back to your dorm, if you want," she offers, but Wilbur shakes his head.

"I'll be fine. I just didn't get much sleep last night," he lies.

"Okay. Well... just let me know if you need anything. You looked a little pale."

Wilbur nods, and after exchanging smiled goodbyes, they part ways and he heads back to his dorm alone.

Fuck. He hadn't really meant to fall asleep during class. If Dr. Henning hadn't said anything, it was doubtful he saw, but still. Sleeping in class wasn't normally something he let himself do.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and he pulls it out to find three different strings of text messages. One is from his mother.

*Still nothing*, the top one says. All the rest are buried beneath it.

The next thread is from Techno.

*Hope you survived Brit Lit. Talk to Phil! He can help you with your next poem. I asked him about it last week and he said it's an easy assignment, you just gotta think of something to write about.*

The last thread, and from longest ago, is from Tommy. The top message reads, in horribly butchered typing:

*my mom s gojn to be so crinfe when you anb techno come over saturday. pls ignor.*

Wilbur flicks open the one from Techno and responds: No.

TECHNO: I'm telling you. He could help.

WILBUR: No.

TECHNO: He's in his office until 5:30.

WILBUR: No.

TECHNO: Tell him I sent you.

WILBUR: Do you know what "no" means?

TECHNO: Gtg, I'm studying for bio. Don't you want to impress that girl?

WILBUR: Fuck you.

He clicks his phone off again and shoves it into his pocket.

He's going to have to call his mom. It sucks, mostly because he already knows what the news will be. He can judge it from the top message alone, and how many times she's already said that same thing to him. *Still nothing*. It was *always* nothing. Wilbur had been dealt a shit hand at life since he was young, but it hadn't actually gotten bad until the past few years. That's when they realized how *actually* bad it was, and tried to fix it.

Figures his shit luck wouldn't let that happen.

Five feet from the entrance to his dorm, Wilbur stops in his tracks.

He rocks back on his heels, looking up at the door at the top of the stairs.

He could go inside and call his mom—hear the exact same thing he's heard for the past year and a half. Or he could turn around and go to Techno's professor's stupid fucking office hours.

Five feet from his dorm hall, Wilbur spins on his heel and heads back toward campus.

---

Philza Watson is halfway through grading his freshman comp's exam essays when there's a tentative knock on his office door.

For the second time within a month period, he fears for his life, thinking it's the department head again. It's not. When he calls 'hello' and the door swings open, there's a twiggy, brown-haired boy clutching a brown messenger bag to his side, looking utterly pale and out of breath.

"Uh, is this Dr. Watson's office?" the boy asks breathlessly.

Phil's head tilts. "Yep. That's me."

When the boy continues to stand in the doorway, Phil sets down his pen and gestures for him to come inside.

"Come in, come in. Take a seat."

Hesitantly, the boy slips inside and over to the desk. He plops into a chair—the same one Techno tends to choose—and places his bag on his lap. Then he just... sits there.

That's fine, Phil thinks to himself. He's dealt with shy students before. Not everyone can be Techno waltzing in with a hundred questions ready for rapid-fire.

"What class are you in?" he starts, because he can't place where the kid's from.

He takes another look at the frizzy brown curls and brown eyes. He *really* can't place where he's from. Usually he's pretty good at remembering faces, and remembering what classes match with who. This boy is a complete mystery.

"Um... British Literature."

Phil frowns. He doesn't teach that class. "Which one? 1800 or contemporary?"

The boy fidgets. "1800."

"That's Dr. Henning's class."

"I know. Um, Techno sent me here. I need help with a poem."

Phil leans back in his chair, grading totally abandoned. "Really? What's your name?"

"I'm Wilbur."

*Wilbur*, Phil thinks. His eye catches on Wilbur's bag again, where guitar shaped pins and one very small button reading 'RATZ' are pinned. This must be *Wilbur*. The boy Techno hated at the beginning of the semester, but wouldn't shut up about now. He'd heard all about their latest escapades off campus, now accompanied by someone named Tommy, who Techno swore was a high schooler sneaking onto campus. Phil had yet to meet either of them. Until now.

"Wilbur," Phil greeted with a brilliant smile, "it's nice to finally meet you. I'm Phil. What sort of poem do you need to write?"

Wilbur's shoulders relax ever so slightly. "A good one?" he asks, lips curving with a tentative smile.

Phil laughs. "Alright. A good one coming right up. Let's see what you've got."

## Chapter End Notes

ahahah ahaa I did a little updating of the tags this week uhhhhh...

//

thanks for reading! comments and kudos are always appreciated!

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# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

“I don’t get this game,” Techno says to Tommy. They're sitting side-by-side on the college's rock-hard bleachers. “Who likes being tackled while sprinting at twenty miles an hour? They should all just be wrestlers.”

“Ah, yes. Football players are the closeted wrestlers of this country.”

## Chapter Notes

cws: brief mention of a pet death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are a lot of things Techno will write poetry about. Flowers, rivers, the birds squawking outside his dorm window in the morning and the sun as it sets beyond the forest trees. He wrote about sleeping, once. He wrote about his high school cafeteria. He wrote about writing.

He does not write about death. There are too many death poems in existence already, in his opinion. Plus, what is he going to add? The only thing he’s ever watched die was his pet goldfish when he was three-years-old. He barely remembers it. He only remembers it’s name—Carl—and the sinking feeling he’d had in his stomach when he ran to tell his mother it was gone.

Long story short, he doesn’t write about death. But everything else is open game. With poetry, there was always a way to twist the mundane into something bigger than it is.

Well... Everything except for football games.

“I don’t get this game,” Techno says to Tommy. They're sitting side-by-side on the college's rock-hard bleachers. “Who *likes* being tackled while sprinting at twenty miles an hour? They should all just be wrestlers.”

“Ah, yes. Football players are the closeted wrestlers of this country.”

Techno rolls his eyes at Wilbur’s sarcastic response. “I’m just sayin’. Football is a dumb game.”

Someone scores on the playing field, and Tommy jumps out of the bench beside him.

“*Yeahhh!* Let’s go!” he hollers.

Wilbur laughs. Techno huffs, and stubbornly does not smile at the seventeen-year-old's enthusiasm. He doesn't. Not even a little bit.

When Tommy finally sits back down, Wilbur taps Techno's leg and points to the field.

"Look, I know how to make this interesting for you. See that man, there? Number three?"

Techno nods dubiously.

"Okay, well he's actually madly in love with number twelve from the other team."

Tommy lets out a wheezing choke from Techno's other side. They both ignore him.

"Alright? I don't see how this is helping."

"Whenever Number Three has the ball, Number Twelve secretly stays out of the way so he can score the touch down. Problem is—because there's always a problem in books—" Wilbur points to another player on Number Three's side. "—Number Eight over there knows about this secret affair, and he is not happy. Whenever he gets the chance, he intercepts the ball so Number Three can't get it."

As if Wilbur's predicted the game, the players toss the ball and Number Eight intercepts it. He takes off down the field, toward Number Twelve's goal. Number Three sprints after him.

"Uh oh, don't look now, but I think your antagonist is about to score," Tommy says, leaning in to be heard.

The three watch with bated breath as Number Three, Twelve, and Eight all hurdle down the field.

"Number Three is running for his life. If the ball touches Number Twelve's territory, Number Eight's going to reveal their secret affair," Wilbur narrates over the crowd's steadily increasing roar. "Oh! Oh wait! Someone's running at him! It's... Number Five coming in to trip up Number Eight! He knows about the affair too, and is fighting to protect Number Three's true love!"

"Oh my god," Tommy says. "Why does Number Three have, like, all the bitches?"

Out on the field, Number Five tackles Number Eight. As the game resets and all the players pick themselves back up, Techno turns to Wilbur with a grin.

"You hate literature, do you?"

Wilbur shrugs. "I hate overanalyzing it for classes. I actually *like* reading. Except maybe poetry. And old shit."

Techno tilts his head. "You'd be a good storyteller, y'know."

"You should write a novel about American football and how bad it is compared to ours," Tommy chimes in, much less seriously.

Wilbur snorts, but his gaze stays locked on the field. He doesn't reply beyond that.

---

By the time the game finally ends, the sky's gone dark. Crickets chirp as Techno follows Wilbur back to his truck, where the three of them pile in and head down the road to Tommy's house. They pass L'Manburg High on the way, and Tommy and Wilbur shout profanities out the window until the glow of the high school's windows is long gone.

"My mom's going to be cringe," Tommy warns as they get closer to the GPS's end destination. This is, like, the fourth time Techno's been reminded.

"It's fine," Wilbur says, clicking on his blinker and taking a right into the neighborhood. "You should hear the way my mom sounds whenever I mention you guys. It's like I've never had friends before."

"Awww you talk about us?" Tommy says at the same time as Techno replies, "Maybe you *haven't* had friends."

Wilbur rolls his eyes at both of them, then directs Tommy to point out his house when they get close.

Techno watches silently out the window as uniform houses whiz past, all donned with golden porch lights and blinds drawn shut. Old oak trees with sprawling limbs stretch out over the sidewalks and street, blocking out the view of stars above.

When they finally arrive on Tommy's street, Wilbur parks on the side of the road.

Tommy hops out first. He runs up the sidewalk to his front porch, and bangs on the door. Then he turns and waves to them.

"Hurry up!"

Wilbur meets Techno on the sidewalk, and they exchange similarly fond head shakes before marching to the porch.

When Tommy's mom finally opens the door, she's smiling.

"Wilbur! Techno! It's been a while!"

It had not, in fact, been that long since the two of them last dropped Tommy off here. Techno bobs his head anyway, and doesn't correct her as she ushers them through the entryway.

90% of Tommy's house—Techno finds out as they make their way through Tommy's ad-lib tour—does not match Tommy's personality *at all*. It's too clean. Much too clean. The entryway has a little wooden cabinet pressed up against the side wall, vases of flowers littering its surface. There's a piano in the connecting room, and the living room is softly

glowing with the light of two, golden lamps. A red and white woven rug on the floor is home to two dogs, who only get up to lick and sniff Techno's hands before laying back down again. He doesn't blame them. It's getting pretty late.

The kitchen is blue and white themed, and they stop there to pick up food and drinks before following Tommy upstairs.

That's the 90%. The 10% that does match Tommy's energy is his bedroom.

The first thing that catches Techno's eye is Tommy's gamer setup.

"Yooo," he says, brushing past Wilbur and walking over to the PC, "you've got one of those light up keyboards?"

"Oh, yeah," Tommy says. He's sitting on his bed, which is only half-made, and fiddling with some miniature plastic remote control. "You guys should add me on Discord. I'm a certified gamer."

"Certified gamer," Wilbur mutters, as if testing the words to tease him with later.

Techno smiles and turns away from the setup. "So, what are we doing?"

Tommy presses a button on the remote, and a strip of neon lights above his PC light up red. He slides off the bed and heads to the keyboard.

"What game do we want to play first? I can hook my switch up here, I think, and we can play the games I have on that. Ooh! We also have a Wii, but it's downstairs."

"I told you I'm crushing you in Mario Kart," Techno says. "Wanna get that over with now? Or later?"

Tommy tilts his chin up. "You're going down, *Blade*."

---

After viciously winning five Mario Kart matches in a row, Techno listens to Tommy pout as Wilbur fidgets with the PC, trying to open Netflix.

"It's not fucking fair," Tommy whines, rolling over on the bed so he's staring up at Techno. "You're older than me. Shouldn't your reaction time to turtles be slower?"

Techno laughs. "Are you calling me old?"

"Old. Old. Old—"

"Child. Child. Child."

“Settle down now, kids,” Wilbur calls over his shoulder. “I have procured Netflix. What do we want to watch?”

“Moana,” Tommy says, no hesitation.

Techno levels him with a deadpan stare. “*Child*,” he repeats.

“*Whaaatt*? It’s good! And it’s got The Rock!”

“So does Empire State.”

Tommy makes a face.

Wilbur clicks around with the mouse. “Give me a playing field, at least. Like, what sort of film? Are we leaning Moana or Empire State type vibes?”

“Moana!” Tommy yells.

“Disney movies are fine, to be honest. But not Moana. Please. If I have to listen to ‘You’re Welcome’ one more time I think I’ll rip my own ears off,” Techno says.

“This is discrimination,” Tommy mutters. He dramatically flops an arm over Techno’s legs, and Techno throws it back at him.

“This is payback for having us listen to it on repeat in Wilbur’s car two days ago.”

“It’s a good song!”

“Not that good!”

“Bitch.”

Wilbur scrolls down. “What about Kim Possible? Emperor’s New Groove? Finding Nemo?”

“Up?” Tommy queries.

Wilbur scrolls down to Up. “We could do that. Techno?”

Techno shrugs. “Well I’m obviously not getting back on the Empire State side of Netflix, so sure.”

With a hum, Wilbur clicks on Up and presses play.

They settle on Tommy’s bed together, side by side, with Wilbur scrunched in the middle. Tommy presses a button on his mini remote, and the neon lights click off, leaving them in darkness only penetrated by the PC screen. They relax back against the headboard, and the movie begins.

About halfway through, Wilbur falls asleep. His head ducks down, and Techno patiently waits for Tommy to notice and make fun of him, but that never happens. He’s too absorbed in

the movie. Techno reaches up and guides Wilbur's head to a more comfortable position on his shoulder, then returns to the film.

Another ten minutes later, the combined peacefulness of Tommy's darkened room and the warmth of Wilbur's forehead pressed against his side is starting to make him drowsy. He blinks. And blinks again. And again.

At some point, Tommy nods off against Wilbur's side. Five minutes later, Techno closes his eyes and does not open them back up.

The world outside spins and rushes on, but inside the Innit's house, three boys are oblivious to it all.

---

“Oh *shit!*”

Techno groggily blinks open his eyes, and immediately regrets it when he is blinded by the all-powerful sun. It takes him a minute to squint, roll over, and remember where he is.

Tommy's house. They'd gone over to Tommy's house last night, and must have fallen asleep.

Suddenly, Wilbur's muffled cursing makes a lot more sense.

Techno sits bolt upright as Wilbur scrambles off the bed.

“Wha—? Wil? We fell asleep.”

“I *know* we fell asleep,” Wilbur responds. He ducks down to the floor and starts jamming on his sneakers. “Fuck. I'm supposed to be somewhere right now.”

Techno frowns and rubs his eyes. “What? What time is it?”

“Noon!”

“Crap.”

Techno slides out of bed after Wilbur. Tommy's still sprawled out across the mattress, eyes closed and breath coming quietly. He must be a heavy sleeper, Techno thinks, because they aren't exactly being quiet.

Techno slides his own shoes on while Wilbur frantically laces his sneakers. Wil's hair is messed up, Techno notices. It's a rather serious case of bed head. He doesn't point it out, though, and Wilbur doesn't fix it. Once their shoes are on, they both stumble to their feet.

Wilbur reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. “Shit,” he mutters again. “I'm really fucking late.”

“Where are you going?” Techno asks. “If it’s somewhere nearby, you can drive there and I’ll just walk back to the dorms. Or I can come with you and just hang out... so you don’t have to drive me back. I don’t mind.”

Wilbur looks up at him, and, for a second, Techno thinks he’s about to cry. His face is puffy and pink, and he’s gripping his phone so tight his fingers have turned white. Then his shoulders slump, and he shakes his head.

“No. It’s fine. I’ll take you back. It’s on my way, I’m just... *late*.”

Sheets shift on the bed behind them, and Techno turns around just as Tommy’s eyes creak open.

“Hmm?” Tommy mumbles, rolling over. “Wha’s goin’ on?”

“It’s morning, dumbass,” Wilbur provides. “We have to go.”

“Nooo...” Tommy whines. “Wha’bout Up?”

“We finished it,” Techno says as Wilbur snags his keys from Tommy’s desk. “You can go back to sleep if you want. Wilbur just has somewhere he has to be. It’s past noon.”

“Mm.” Tommy face plants back into his pillow. “I’ll ge’ up.”

Despite his promise, he does not move again. Techno snorts and turns to leave with Wil.

They trample down the staircase and into the front corridor.

“Morning boys!” Mrs. Innit calls from the kitchen. “Want breakfast?”

“I’ve actually got an appointment I’m running really late for,” Wilbur replies as Mrs. Innit pops her head around the corner. “But I really appreciate the offer, and will gladly take you up on it sometime else.”

Mrs. Innit smiles. “Alright. Drive safe. Is Tommy awake?”

Techno shakes his head, and she sighs.

“Okay. I’ll tell him you left.”

“Alright, bye Mrs. Innit!” the two call as Wilbur opens the front door and they step outside.

The one bright side of waking up late is that the world outside is not completely fucking freezing at twelve in the afternoon. Warm sunshine wraps around Techno like a jacket—which he is thankfully still wearing—as Wilbur herds him to the car and they both hop inside. With practiced ease, Wilbur twists the keys and starts the engine.

“Would you mind texting my mom back that I’m on my way? I should still be in messages,” Wilbur asks as the engine splutters to life. He passes Techno his phone.

“Sure. Password?”

“1155”

“Is that a birthday?”

“No. It’s Fireworks Night in Britain.”

As Techno types in the password, he raises an eyebrow. “What the heck is Fireworks Night?”

“It’s the day Guy Fawkes tried to blow up Parliament.”

“You know, most people have passwords that are like, birthdays and stuff. Maybe a combination of their favorite numbers.”

Wilbur clicks on his blinker and turns out into the street. They do a K turn at the Innit’s driveway, then speed back on the way to campus.

Techno opens messages and types a quick ‘On my way’ to Wilbur’s mom, then clicks the phone off. The only message that’d been before his was one from Wilbur’s mom, reading ‘Where are you’ with several question marks in tow. He must be meeting her for lunch or something.

“Thanks,” Wilbur says, taking back his phone.

The rest of the drive back to campus is quiet. At some point, Techno pushes on the radio, but Wilbur looks stressed, and it’s just ads, so a minute later he clicks it off again. Despite the obvious speeding, they arrive back at the dorms in one piece.

Techno hops down to the sidewalk, and Wilbur waves to him.

“I’ll see you later tonight?” Wil asks.

“Yeah, probably. I’ve got a couple chapters to get through for my Classic Literature course, but we could get dinner.”

Wilbur nods. “Okay. Sounds good.”

Even though he was in a rush, even though he was late, he stays there for a minute, staring as if there’s something else he needs to say. His hands tighten around the steering wheel, and he opens his mouth. Techno is prepared for an explanation—a reason why he looks so panicked at the thought of being late for... whatever this is.

Instead, what comes out is a “See you later.”

“Yeah, see ya,” Techno responds. “Have fun with your mom.”

“I... I will. Thanks.”



With that, Techno slams the car door shut. Wilbur pulls away from the curb, heading back off campus, and Techno turns with resignation toward his dorm room.

He's got a book to make it through.

## Chapter End Notes

yOOOO ty guys for reading! :))

comments/kudos are always appreciated! also, to the people who've been spreading this work on twt, tumblr, etc., tysm :) I really appreciate it and am glad y'all are enjoying.

we have [fanart!!!!](#) \*screaming\*

my [twitter](#)

my [tumblr](#)

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Summary

“Why the petting zoo?” Techno asks as they’re on their way.  
Wilbur shrugs. “Free therapy?”  
“GOATS!” Tommy shouts.

## Chapter Notes

cw: talk about a goat dying... anyway

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

March, like Techno predicted all those days ago, dragged on slowly. As midterms approached, he met Wilbur in the library as often as he could. Sometimes Tommy would come over after school, and the three of them would hang out on the third floor together, snickering, seeing who could spin their pen the fastest, and, on rare occasions, actually getting work done.

The midterms themselves only took about an hour each to complete, but studying ate up all their extra free time. Cafeteria lunches were stuffed into to-go boxes and carted to study tables outside. At least half of Techno’s pitifully meager bank account wound up going to the coffee shop upstairs, where the three met up to help each other go over class notes, or write papers, or complain. There was a lot of complaining.

By the end of midterms week, though, everything got done.

“I’m not going home for spring break,” Wilbur admitted to Techno the Saturday after they finished their last tests. They were laying on the floor in Techno’s dorm, arms and legs sprawled out in a position of defeat. Midterms, as it turned out, had hands.

“I’m not going home either.”

“Wanna come with me and Tommy to the city for a day? I texted him earlier, and he said yes.”

“I’ve got nothin’ better to do, so...”

That’s how Techno finds himself in the back of Wil’s dusty-red pickup truck, speeding over poorly paved highway down to the city for spring break.

“OH YEAH I! TELL YOU SOMETHING, I THINK YOU’LL UNDERSTAND!” Tommy shouts over the highway’s dull roar. All the windows in Wil’s truck are rolled down, allowing the Beatles remastered album to flow out and mid-March air to flow in, but this time Techno was smart. He remembered to bring a hair tie. “WHEN I! SAY THAT SOMETHIN’, I WANNA HOLD YOUR HAANNDD!”

“I wanna hold your hand! I wanna hold your han—d!”

Tommy bursts into hysterical laughter as Wilbur’s voice cracks on the last syllable and he falls into a series of expletives unsafe for child ears.

Around noon, they reach the hotel. It’s shitty and Techno swears it smells like deep-fried pickles, but it has two beds and a pull-out for Tommy, so really it’s all they need. After dropping off their stuff, they pile back into Wilbur’s car and head down to the petting zoo.

“Why the petting zoo?” Techno asks as they’re on their way.

Wilbur shrugs. “Free therapy?”

“GOATS!” Tommy shouts.

There are, in fact, goats. The petting zoo Wilbur brings them to is situated in the middle of a wooded area just outside the city limits. It’s home to a small berry orchard, but the owners keep animals in the back, and the lady is impressively kind as she hands them each a bag of fodder and directs them to the pens.

Tommy instantly falls in love with the singular, fluffy cow. It’s the one pen they aren’t allowed into, but Tommy pokes his hand through the wire fencing and feeds it anyway. Wilbur and Techno slip into the goat pen, where they’re immediately hounded for food.

“Why do I feel like I’m being hunted?” Techno asks as he backs away from a crowd of seven tiny goats.

“If they’re hunting you, they’re not doing a very good job of it,” Wilbur replies. “Absolutely no stealth.”

He’s knelt on the ground a few feet away, hands on the back of a caramel-colored goat. He seems transfixed by the creature’s soft fur, running his fingers through it over and over again.

“You alright there?” Techno asks, then grits his teeth and swats away another goat that’d jumped up on his leg, trying to reach the food.

“This is the most relaxed I think I’ve been since... August.”

Techno snorts. “The school year will really take it out of you.”

Wilbur nods and leans down to wrap his arms around the goat’s neck.

“She’s dying, you know?”

The voice comes from over Techno's shoulder, and he jumps, startling the goats surrounding him. He turns around, and standing just outside the gate is the same woman who greeted them. Her gray hair's tied up in a bun, and she leans over the railing as she observes Wilbur's goat.

"Dying?"

The lady nods. "She's got Enterotoxemia, which is a type of kidney disease in goats. Probably won't make it more than another couple weeks."

Techno looks back over at Wilbur and the goat. Wil's got his face pressed into her fur, basically laying on top of her on the ground. It's sort of funny. It's also sort of sad.

"Oh," Techno says. It's probably the stupidest thing he could say, but it's also the only thing that feels appropriate.

"It's alright. The death is supposed to be painless for her, and even though she's young, she's lived a good life. Made a lot of people happy." She smiles, gesturing over at Wilbur.

"Including your friend, I see."

Techno hums, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah. I think he'd sleep there if you let him."

"Hm?" Wilbur hums, looking up and blinking sleepily. Techno and the lady both laugh.

At some point, Tommy wanders his way back over to join them. To absolutely no one's surprise, he'd fed most of his food to the cow, but he had just enough left over to sprinkle on the ground for the goats and chickens wandering the pen.

At half-past four, they head out for dinner. It's a little early, but they're all hungry and the heart of the city is still forty minutes away. Wilbur plugs a random fast food restaurant into his GPS, and they sing more Beatles songs until Tommy gets tired and retreats to his phone.

"What'd you think of the goats?" Techno speaks up after they've been driving for ten minutes in silence. "They kept trying to maul me."

"They were cute, I guess," Tommy says. "I liked the cow better."

"I liked my goat," Wilbur confidently states. "She was sweet."

Techno briefly considers telling him about her condition, but upon seeing Wilbur's soft smile in the rear-view mirror, decides against it. "She was."

The car lapses back into silence, but it's a comfortable one. Wilbur turns the speakers down low as they coast along, and as the sun finally starts to lower on the horizon, Techno thinks that he'd rate spring break an 'S' on the tier list.

---

Wilbur hasn't felt this good in a while.

It's probably because he'd been skipping his treatments until last Sunday, when his mom forced him into one, but he decides to tell himself it's because he's having fun instead. Which isn't a lie. He is having fun.

They get back to the hotel around eight—stomachs full and eyes drooping—but somehow manage to stay up past midnight playing the multitude of board games Wilbur has stacked in the trunk of his car. Uno, Life, Apples to Apples and Cards Against Humanity. Tommy asks about Monopoly, to which Wilbur takes twenty minutes out of their Uno game to explain exactly why he does not and will not *ever* play Monopoly.

“Besides the reinforcement of capitalism in game form, it kills families, Tommy,” Wilbur dramatically explains. “My dad once played Monopoly with my mother ten years ago, and want to guess if they're still married today?”

“Sounds like you have Monopoly trauma. You should really see someone about that,” Tommy mutters.

Wilbur laughs, and Tommy's face breaks into a bright smile.

Around one A.M., Tommy suggests going down to the pool. Techno gives this idea a hard pass, already lounged out across one of the beds with his eyes closed, but Wilbur agrees, and the two of them head off downstairs in search of the pool.

“Found it!” Tommy shouts from down the hall, and Wilbur hurries to shush him.

“People are asleep!” he hisses.

Tommy shrugs, yanking open the pool door and stepping inside. “Not my problem.”

“For fuck's sake, Tommy, you're going to get us kicked out of here...”

The pool room is warm when Wilbur steps inside. The humidity wraps around him like a blanket, luring him further in as Tommy kicks off his shoes and starts wading in.

“You can swim, right?” Wilbur asks as he shucks his own shoes next to a plastic bench. “I don't need to be keeping you from drowning?”

Tommy, already up to his waist in water, grins mischievously and backs away. “I guess you'll find out,” he says, then ducks under.

Wilbur snorts and rolls his eyes.

Neither of them brought swimsuits, but Wilbur figures one ruined pair of clothes does them no harm. When Tommy doesn't bother coming back up for a couple seconds, Wilbur walks to the edge and cannon balls in, hoping to annoy whatever sense of peace he's found under the water.

When he breaks the surface, he scans it for Tommy's face.

He still hasn't come up.

The panic is white hot and blinding. It shoots up Wilbur's spine, making his head spin as he frantically looks for Tommy's dark outline beneath the water.

"Tommy?" he calls out, stupidly, before spotting him and muttering an "Oh shit."

He dives beneath the surface, grabbing Tommy's arm and starting to yank him toward the air.

Oh god. This is his fault. He shouldn't have thought he was joking. He shouldn't have agreed to come down here. It was one a.m., there was no lifeguard, and—

Tommy starts cackling immediately upon breaching the surface, and Wilbur lets go of his arm.

"What the hell, man?" Tommy laughs, wiping the bangs out of his eyes and grinning. "I was doing *meditation* down there, Wilbur. Just join me next time instead of yanking me to the surface like a little bitch."

"I thought you were drowning!"

"I can swim!"

"I didn't know that! You said I'd find out!"

"Well now you found out, didn't you?"

Wilbur splashes Tommy in the face, and snickers when Tommy splutters and gapes like a fish out of water.

After the drowning scare, Wilbur doesn't quite feel like swimming. He sits on the steps and watches Tommy try to do a handstand instead, occasionally laughing when he comes up sputtering about his ears getting clogged.

He hasn't felt this good in a while.

He runs his fingers through the water, watching little ripples slip through his fingers. His hands look strange and distorted, glowing blue from the pool lights and warping beneath the waves. It reminds him, oddly, of something his mother told him when he'd first been diagnosed.

*"As much as people want to think we can, you really can't control your body,"* she'd said, softly, to him over the sound of crickets chirping outside their car. She'd been taking him home from his first ER experience, and as soon as he'd gotten in the car he'd broken down crying. *"It does what it wants, even when what it wants is unfair."*

Wilbur is snapped from the memory as Tommy sits down next to him on the step. He glances over, but Tommy isn't looking at him. His blue eyes are on the water, eyebrows furrowed.

“What’s wrong?” Wilbur asks.

“I signed up for classes at Essempi.”

“You did?” Wilbur instantly brightens. “That’s great! Which ones?”

Tommy huffs a quiet laugh. “Videography, English Comp, and a math course.”

“I’m taking Videography as an elective. The eight week class with Dr. Harris?”

Tommy nods.

“Yoooo! We’ll have a class together! I bet I could convince Techno to take it, too. That’d be so fun. I bet he’d be shit at it. I— Tommy?”

Tommy was looking down at the water. In his lap, his hands are shaking.

“I just—” Tommy cuts himself off with a frustrated exhale, and looks up at Wilbur. “I’m scared, Wil. What if I wind up sucking at everything?”

“You won’t.”

“I’m supposed to choose a major. I’m a senior. All my other friends know what they want to do, and exactly who they want to be, but I just... I have no clue. I don’t know.” Tommy waves his hand across the water, sending little ripples scattering away from them. “I’m not the greatest student. I don’t get straight A’s, even in high school. What if I go to college and flunk out? What if I can’t find something I’m good at? What if I’m not good at anything at all?”

For a moment after Tommy finishes, the room echoes with the sound of his voice. Wilbur sits back as the echo fades, replaced by the bubbling pool jets and quiet lapsing of the water.

Finally, he replies. “You sound a lot like me when I was your age.”

Tommy looks over at him, surprised, but Wilbur pretends not to notice the shocked expression on his face. He continues,

“I applied to college as undecided, too. At the time, it was more because I just... didn’t really want to pick something at all, versus you not knowing. I didn’t want to go to college. I thought it was a waste of time.”

“Why?”

Wilbur shrugs. “A lot of reasons. But my mom convinced me, and when I got here, I just... I sucked at everything. My freshman core classes were horrible. The only one I enjoyed was History, but I knew I didn’t want to major in that. It’s great, and I was good at it, but the lecture hall was too boring for me. I needed a major that *did* something.”

“So you chose music?”

“So I’d brought my guitar,” Wilbur corrects, skipping backward in the story. “I usually played it in my room, but one day I brought it outside the student center to tune and try out a couple songs. Turns out, a bunch of people thought I was busking, and they gave me money. I attracted a little crowd, and by the end, someone who’d been watching for a while came up to me. He said he was head of the music department, and asked me if I was a music major. When I told him I was undecided, he said I should be one.”

“So you just... let him convince you?”

Wilbur laughs. “No, Tommy. I let him tell me what I already knew. I knew, going into college, that I loved music. My biggest dream was—*is*—to start a band and play tours all around the world. I think I was just too scared to admit to myself that I had aspirations like that.”

“Why?”

“Because aspirations are scary. Y’know? Being apathetic is low risk—you don’t care about something, so you don’t care when it doesn’t work out. But aspiring for something? Wanting it? That’s a gamble with fate. If you lose something that’s important to you, it’s going to hurt.”

Tommy’s silent for a few seconds. Then he asks, “So why’d you pick something that could hurt you?”

That, Wilbur thinks, is probably the easiest question Tommy’s asked all night.

“Because what the fuck is the point of living if you don’t feel something every once in a while?”

The pool area falls silent again, and Wilbur hums as Tommy rests his head on his shoulder. They’re wet. Tommy’s hair is dripping all over, like a wet dog’s, and both their t-shirts cling to their skin. Wilbur lifts a hand out of the water just to see that his fingertips have turned into flesh-colored prunes. Despite that, it’s the most comfortable Wilbur has felt in years. He wants to take the moment and capture it, keep it locked away for himself to return to whenever things inevitably get tough again. Because they will get tough again.

But for now they aren’t. For now, Wilbur is just a boy on a spring break trip with two of his friends. He’s sitting in a hotel pool that reeks of chlorine, and reassuring one of them that everything will work itself out. He has fingers that look like prunes, and wet clothes, and for now his body is not rebelling against him. So he sits, and he exists, and he aspires.

## Chapter End Notes

it is 12:20 in the afternoon and i am thinking very hard about goats. they're so cute. pls go pet goats.



//

comments and kudos are always appreciated!!

if you want to be notified when this fic updates, consider subbing to it (or to my ao3) :D

my [twitter](#)

my [tumblr](#)

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

For the first time in his seventeen years of existence, Tommy is excited to go back to school...

## Chapter Notes

CWs: none that I can think of, but feel free to DM my twt or tumblr if you'd like any added

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy returns home from spring break, and for the first time in his seventeen years of existence, is excited to go back to school. He drags his mom out for new supplies, and goes with Techno to get his student ID made. Wilbur was back out of town, so Techno acted as tech support and helped him get his student account set up.

When Wilbur returns, the three of them go on an impromptu tour of campus together. It's mostly to show Tommy where his individual classes will be, because he already knows the campus' general layout from hanging out there so often, but Wilbur takes the opportunity to perform dramatic monologues in front of each building—like a real tour guide. Except Tommy is pretty sure 90% of the information Wilbur spouts is complete and utter bullshit.

“And here we have the Liberal Arts West Building,” Wilbur says, gesturing to the tall, orange-brick building in front of them. It's four stories tall, and the entrance is shrouded by trees. “This building, built in ages so prehistoric that no one knew how to design a lift—excuse me, an *elevator*—that didn't work like *shit*, is home to your typical Literature Nerd. It's also home to most of your core classes, but we don't talk about those.”

“I think we should talk about those, actually, since that's eighty percent of what I'm taking,” Tommy interrupts.

Wilbur ignores him, prattling on. “In 1952, there was a famed assassination of the Essempi president right here, on the Liberal Arts front lawn. This horrible assassination occurred after a British Lit class got a little too caught up in their *Lord of the Flies* discussion, and—”

“Alright!” Techno interrupts, clapping his hands and stepping between Tommy and Wilbur. “Let's move on.”

“Wha—? But my English classroom is in there!” Tommy complains.

“I’ll get Phil to show you it later. C’mon.”

They leave the Liberal Arts' front lawn, and wind their way through campus to the main quad. In the very center, there’s a fountain with a blue-green granite statue of the school’s flag jutting up from it. Water spews out the top and bubbles down into the basin.

“This here is where seniors go when they graduate,” Wilbur says, gesturing toward the pool of water. “It’s tradition that every senior walks through the fountain after officially graduating.”

“That one’s actually true,” Techno comments.

Tommy tilts his head, studying the rivulets of rushing water spilling down, then starts to shuck off his shoes.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Wilbur says, rushing forward and waving his hands. “What are you doing?”

“Going in.”

“You’re not a senior!”

“You’re not even a freshman,” Techno helpfully adds.

Tommy doesn’t listen to either of them. Killjoys. That’s what they are. He kicks his sneakers to the side and peels his socks off after them. Then stalks toward the fountain.

It’s the tail-end of March, so the brick sidewalk of the quad is cold under his feet as he crosses it. The water will, no doubt, be even colder. But it’s too late to back out now.

He reaches the basin and steps up onto it, then glances back over his shoulder.

“You coming?” he asks, and doesn’t wait for an answer before hopping in.

He was right about the water. It’s freezing cold, like ice when it hits his bare ankles and slaps against his legs. He shrieks involuntarily, and somewhere behind him someone laughs. It’s fun, though, and the water sloshes around the basin as he wades further into it.

“Come on!” he calls back to the two killjoys still standing on the brick sidewalk. “It’s not even that cold! I’ll beat you to the flag!”

“Tommy, this is dumb.”

Tommy spins around to aim a kick at Techno. He’s far from the basin, several feet away, but Tommy has motive. His shot lands, a spray of water landing in a dark stripe across Techno’s shirt, and Techno gasps.

“Alright, that’s it,” he says, and Tommy *screams* when he rushes forward and jumps into the fountain. Wilbur, cackling, is not far behind.

The three of them race around the basin, kicking up water, sloshing it over the edge, and shrieking as ice water seeps into their clothes. By the time Tommy calls truce, he’s been dunked under three times and is out of breath from laughing so hard.

Hair skews his vision as he stands up, gripping onto Techno to stay steady. He’s laughing and soaking wet, and he knows for a fact that all the students walking around them are watching—but there’s not many on the weekend, and even if there were, Tommy wouldn’t care.

“Look at the child. He looks like a wet puppy,” Wilbur teases. He’s still sitting on his ass in the fountain, brown fuzz flattened to a stringy mess on his forehead.

Tommy reaches down and gives his shoulder a well-timed push, sending him back under the water.

Wilbur comes up sputtering, and Tommy laughs harder.

“Oh my god, oh my god, I’m gonna pee myself. I’m gonna pee, I’m gonna pee—” he says, practically hyperventilating as he struggles out of the fountain and onto the sidewalk.

“There’s a bathroom in the business building!” Techno shouts after him as he takes off across the grass.

---

By the time Tommy makes it back to the fountain, Techno and Wilbur are sitting on a bench beside the quad. Wilbur’s got his legs tucked to his chest, chin resting on knee, while Techno rambles on about something Tommy doesn’t have the patience to figure out the context of. He hears something about a novel, something about classics. Something about how Wilbur should read one, because he’d enjoy it. It doesn’t really matter to him.

He plops down beside them and slumps against Wilbur’s shoulder.

“God... that was the best wee of my life.”

Wilbur snorts a laugh, and Tommy smiles. He’s still dripping everywhere. When he’d gone into the business building, he’d left a trail of water all down the linoleum hallways as he searched for a restroom. Luckily, he found the bathroom before he peed himself. Unluckily, the janitor had some mopping to do.

Tommy shivers, and is unsurprised when Wilbur does the same.

“We should probably go change,” Techno sighs. He stands from the bench, and when Wilbur nor Tommy go to follow him, he reaches down both hands and yanks them to their feet.

“Ugh...” Wilbur mutters, pressing a hand to the side of his head. “Tommy shoved me under the water so hard my ears got clogged.”

“That’s called payback, bitch.”

“Shut up and lets go to Techno’s dorm for towels. It’s closest.”

And so Tommy’s tour concludes early, without getting to find half his classes.

---

Tommy is going to kill whoever made them end his tour early.

Oh wait, that was him.

Okay, maybe he won’t *kill* them. Maybe he’ll treat them with grace, and mercy, and all those things priests drone on about during church on Sundays. Maybe he’ll blame Wilbur and Techno for leaving him alone on his first day of class, when the class they have is *together*. Or maybe he’ll just mentally curse himself out as he flips the campus map over and over again on his phone.

“Where the fuck is the film building?” he mutters, squinting at the screen.

He can’t even figure out where *he* is. There are trees on either side of him, and a long stretch of sidewalk ahead leading... somewhere. There’s a building off to his right, but it’s too far across the grass for him to read what its sign says. He’s never been on this side of campus.

Frustrated, lost, and about to be late, Tommy swipes the map off his screen and goes to his text messages instead.

TOMMY: WHEREW TEH FUCK IKS THL FIPM BUIDLING?!!?!?!?????!!!

TECHNO: I hate that the only word you spelled right in that sentence is “fuck.”

WILBUR: Where are you right now?? I’ll direct you

TOMMY: FUCK DO I INOW

WILBUR: Jesus Christ ok I’m going to come find you. Turn your location on

TECHNO: L

When lost, Tommy’s always been told to do one thing: hug a tree. So, five minutes later when Wilbur comes trudging up the sidewalk to his aid, that is what he finds Tommy doing.

“Thank fuck,” Tommy says, dropping his arms from around the tree trunk and joining Wilbur on the sidewalk. “We’re gonna be late. Why’d you take so long?”

“Why the fuck were you hugging a tree?”

“I was lost, duh.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, then points off down the sidewalk. “The film building’s right down there, genius. If you’d kept walking for another two minutes you would have found it on your own.”

“*Sorry!* I panicked!”

Wilbur chuckles and reaches out to ruffle Tommy’s hair. His touch is gentle, and his expression is fond, and it makes Tommy’s chest twist happily.

“Let’s go to class, Child,” Wilbur says.

“Yeah whatever,” Tommy replies, but he’s smiling.

---

Tommy’s first week of school goes by in a blaze of syllabi and homework. Since the three classes he’s chosen to take are only half-term, everything is due much, *much* quicker than his high school homework. Admittedly, he doesn’t have much high school homework, though. As a senior taking dual credit, he’d gotten out of some of his classes much earlier than others—Mr. Sam’s included. Instead of Mr. Sam’s math class, he transitions to college algebra at Essempi.

College algebra sucks. He hates it. It deserves an F on the tier list. Or maybe a D, because Tommy’s not horrible at math, he just doesn’t *like* it.

English, he decides on day two, would get an B. It’s not great, it’s not terrible. It’s taught by Techno’s favorite professor, apparently, and Tommy likes him. He talks about books like they’re actual events that happened, makes Tommy question the divide between fiction and the reality it tries to portray.

It also helps that, once, after Techno returned from an office hours session with Phil, he told Tommy that Phil really liked him too.

“Maybe you’re a budding English major,” Techno had teased, leaning over in the library’s coffee-stained study booth to nudge Tommy’s elbow.

“Don’t listen to the word-nerd,” Wilbur said from across the table. He was typing away at an essay, and the click of his keys kept a staccato beat behind his words. “Those English majors will brainwash you if they get even the slightest opportunity.”

Tommy shook his head. “Thanks but no thanks, Tech-no-Blade. I like Videography *way* more.”

Videography, his final course, gets an S on the tier list. Not only because it's his favorite, not only because it's the one he's best at, but because he's better at it than both Wilbur *and* Techno. With Tubbo and Ranboo, he's never really been the best at something before. In math, Tubbo was always quicker. In English, Ranboo always chose better words. But in film, Tommy *excels*.

And he loves it. It's the only homework he's willing to spend hours working on. It's the only lecture he doesn't find his eyes drifting to the clock during. It's just him, his videos, and the screen—and Tommy is *in love* with it.

It doesn't surprise him when, one night, he rolls over in his bed at home and realizes: *I think I found my major*.

## Chapter End Notes

im posting this and then going on the world's longest walk bc hollyyy crap that lore...

comments and kudos are always appreciated! I love hearing what you guys think ^-^

my [twitter](#) (where I am currently losing my mind over the recent stream)

my [tumblr](#) (where I can also lose my mind but without a character limit)

ty for reading!! <3

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Summary

“What do we do?” Techno asks when they pause, three feet away from the sniveling child.

Wilbur stands and stares at the shuddering heap on their cafeteria table. “We... sit down? I guess?”

## Chapter Notes

CWs: sickness, emetophobia, and MATH (sorry I had to)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur chose to take the Videography elective purely to meet hour requirements. He thought it would be easy. Get in, make a couple videos, get out with an A. He’d always been good at artsy stuff. This would be a piece of cake.

Right?

“I can’t believe I got a C,” Techno says as the two of them trudge down the film building’s front steps. He’s got his phone in his hand, and is squinting through the sunlit-screen at his digital grade book.

“I got a C minus. I thought this class was supposed to be easy,” Wilbur complains.

Before they can even reach the sidewalk, Wilbur hears the heavy double doors behind them fly open and footsteps thunder down the steps. He turns just in time for Tommy to squeeze between them.

“What did you get on your demonstrative test?” Techno asks him.

Tommy’s face lights with a vicious smile. “An A plus.”

“*What?*” Wilbur and Techno’s say simultaneously.

Tommy continues to grin as he spins around, taking the last few steps backward. “An A plus, you heard me.”

“You’re joking,” Techno deadpans.



They reach the sidewalk, and Wilbur can't decide if he's more pissed off or proud when Tommy holds up a shiny, red 'A+' on his phone.

"Told you," Tommy says to their shocked faces. Then he spins around to walk normally again. "Let's go eat. I'm starving."

As Tommy takes the lead, practically speed-walking in the direction of the cafeteria, Techno leans closer to Wilbur's ear.

"Did we just get shown up by a high schooler?" he whispers.

Wilbur nods his head dazedly. "I think we just did."

---

It's okay that they get utterly obliterated in Videography, though, because two days later Wilbur walks into the cafeteria—Techno on his tail—to find Tommy sitting at their table with his face pressed into his arms. His hoodie is raised, and when Wilbur gets closer, he swears he hears sniffing.

"What do we do?" Techno asks when they pause, three feet away from the sniveling child.

Wilbur stands and stares at the shuddering heap on their cafeteria table. "We... sit down? I guess?"

He pulls up his usual chair, and takes care not to set his food directly on top of any of Tommy's textbooks. The books are scattered all across the table, so it's a pretty difficult feat. Wilbur squints at one of them, then glances back to the boy whose shoulders have gone suspiciously still.

"Math?" he asks.

Slowly, Tommy's head raises from the table. "I fuckin' hate it," he says. Then sucks in a wad of snot. "Numbers are the stupidest fuckin' *bullshit*... balls... shit and piss..."

Wilbur takes in Tommy's puffy red nose, splotchy face, and watering eyes. There's an indent on his cheek—a little star shape from the puffy stars trailing up his hoodie sleeve. He looks exhausted, and beyond frustrated.

"This is because of math?" Wilbur asks again, just to make sure.

"Y-es!"

Tommy's voice cracks, and he dissolves into tears all over again.

"Fuck, shit, Tommy, it'll... it'll be fine! We can help you!"

He glances anxiously to Techno for help, maybe some added reassurance, but Techno is quite literally sitting as far from Tommy at the table as possible. He stares at the teen like he's a time bomb, ticking down to explode. Wilbur's pretty sure he isn't even blinking.

Fuck, alright. No help there.

"What sort of problems are you trying to solve?" Wilbur asks.

He's shit at math, but even worse at dealing with other people crying. If Tommy doesn't stop soon, *he's* going to start crying, and then Techno's *really* going to have his hands full.

Tommy takes a break from sobbing into his sleeve to spin a textbook toward Wilbur. When he scoots closer to take a look, bright red, bolded letters reading 'FINDING THE ZEROS OF CUBIC EXPRESSIONS' stare back at him.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Wilbur mutters to himself.

"See!" Tommy blubbers out. "It's stupid! I c-can't do it! The ei-eight week course was a bad idea. It's t-too fast! I c-can't!"

"Have you asked your mom? Or your professor?"

"My mom's at work, and this homework is due tomorrow. I p-put it off until now and n-now I can't—"

Wilbur cuts him off before he can start to spiral again. He leans over, snagging a pencil from Tommy's scattered collection and bringing it to the textbook pages.

"Do you care if I write in this?" he asks.

Tommy shakes his head, hiccuping.

"Alright. Techno, come here. I need your reading comprehension. We're going to figure this out."

---

It takes them three hours to figure out how to find the zeros of cubic expressions. It takes a pen exploding, two snapped pencils, and a busted eraser to solve Tommy's take home questions. It takes them another hour to figure out logarithmic equations and how to use Tommy's crappy, old, Walmart calculator. But by the time the cafeteria workers finally come to kick them out, every single equation has been solved.

Every single one.

Maybe it would have been faster if one of them was a math major. Maybe it would have been easier if they all weren't a part of the liberal arts, where math is seen as a disease you don't

want to come down with. But they weren't math majors, and therefore math *was* a disease. A terrible one. Hot flashes and everything.

Somehow they managed to fight it off anyway.

"I'm proud of you," Wilbur says to Tommy on their way out of the student center.

Wil's missed all the rest of his classes for the day. His mom is going to kill him if she finds out. He's already been pushing aside his physical health, but if he starts shirking his schoolwork, too? His mom's going to tear him a new one.

When Tommy turns to grin up at him, though—cheeks still slightly pink, nose still slightly runny—he finds he really doesn't mind. He'd do it all over again if it meant seeing him smile.

It hits him, then, how much he sees Tommy as a little brother. A little brother who is going to be *devastated* when he realizes Wilbur is—

"Oof!" Wilbur stumbles back as Tommy slams into him face first. The teenager's arms wrap around his back, squeezing tight as his face presses into Wilbur's chest.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Tommy whispers into his sweatshirt.

Wilbur laughs, hesitantly squeezing Tommy back. "It's no big deal. Honestly, Tommy. It's just maths."

"It's not just maths. It's evil."

Tommy pulls away, and then it's Techno's turn to be smothered. Wilbur watches as Techno's eyes dart frantically from the top of Tommy's head to Wilbur, begging for help. His arms hover awkwardly out at his sides.

*Hug him back, stupid*, Wilbur mouths.

It takes a moment. A moment where Techno's eyes widen and he starts to shake his head. Then Tommy snuffles into his chest, pathetically snotty, and Techno melts. Wilbur sees how his shoulders sink, and how his arms finally wrap around Tommy's tinier frame, pulling him in. He still looks mildly uncomfortable. He still sort of looks like he'd rather push Tommy away instead of pull him close. But he doesn't, and Wilbur is endlessly proud of them both.

---

When Wilbur walks into Phil's office at four o'clock that evening, Phil isn't surprised to see him. After their first meeting, Wilbur kept coming back. He always came ahead of Techno by at least an hour, and at the end of their first meeting, Phil learned why.

*“He’ll hold it over me like he won the lottery,”* Wilbur had explained, sinking back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. *“Please don’t tell him I actually listened to some of his advice.”*

Phil laughingly agreed not to.

Now it was quite a few weeks later, and Wilbur keeps showing up.

Some days are better than others. Some days, Wilbur walks in with a pep in his step and a cheery grin on his face, excited to tell Phil all about what he learned in his classes and what he wants to put into his poem.

Other days, like today, he practically drags himself through the doorway. It’s not for lack of wanting to be there. It’s almost always because, physically, he looks run down. Phil doesn’t know what exactly is going on with him, and he decidedly does not pry after the first time he asked and Wilbur told him it wasn’t anything worth worrying about, but he worries anyway. It’s the consequence of being a teacher.

“Hey Wil,” Phil greets tentatively as the ashen faced, puffy eyed kid takes a seat across from him. “How’s it going? You don’t, uh, look so hot.”

“Tommy got me sick.”

Wilbur’s voice is nasally, and right after finishing he raises an arm to sneeze into his elbow.

Phil winces. “Yikes. Sounds like a nasty virus.”

“It was the fucking water fountain in the middle of campus,” Wilbur explains, sinking lower in his seat. “We messed around in it about a week ago, and it was so fucking cold I think it got me sick. My immune system is shit, and the water was probably gross anyway, and—” Wilbur cuts himself off with a round of coughing.

Phil waits politely for him to finish, then offers him a water bottle from the stash he keeps below his desk. Wilbur gratefully accepts.

“—and my mom’s going to be so pissed.”

“What? Why would she be angry?”

Wilbur shakes his head. “For being irresponsible. I should know better by now.”

Even after these few weeks of Wilbur visiting, the kid is still a bit of an enigma to Phil. It’s the little things. The way he looks sick half the time he shows up anyway, but acts no different from normal. The way he’ll look like he’s struggling to stay awake at only four o’clock in the evening, even when he’s totally engaged in whatever they’re doing. The little “it’s nothing worth worrying about” and “should know better by now.”

Phil looks at this kid and can see, clear as day, that there is something hidden beneath the surface. He just can’t figure out what.

“You should go back to your dorm,” Phil says gently. “No offense, mate, but you look like shit.”

Wilbur sighs, but his nose is so stuffed up that it comes out more like a whistle. “I know, I know. I just—”

He stops, and in that split second, Phil finally sees something he recognizes. Fear. A nervous, anxious fear flickers across Wilbur’s features, and Phil realizes he didn’t come to his office for homework today. He came because he didn’t know what else to do. He’s a child, and he’s sick, and for some reason that frightens him. Maybe he doesn’t know what to do when he’s sick. Maybe this is his first time being sick all alone, in college, without parents there to take care of him. The thought makes Phil’s chest ache.

“I’ve got ibuprofen, if you want it,” he offers. “Or Tylenol? Do you have a fever?”

Wilbur snuffles from his seat across the desk. “I don’t know.”

“You haven’t taken your temperature?”

“I had classes and didn’t start feeling sick until about an hour ago, during one of them.”

Phil frowns. “I don’t have a thermometer here, but maybe you should go see the on-campus clinic. They’ll be able to help you better than I can.”

“They’re just going to tell me things I already know.”

Wilbur lays his head back against the chair and closes his eyes, and Phil huffs a laugh. He feels oddly like he’s lecturing a snotty five-year-old who doesn’t want to go to the doctor for fear of shots.

“Okay, but they might also give you medicine to make you feel better.”

Wilbur hums. “Or they might send me away. To the hospital or something.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic. Why would they do that?”

“I haven’t been to the doctors in ages, Phil. They’re gon’ be mad at me.”

Wilbur’s eyes are still closed. Phil’s brow furrows—there’s no way he doesn’t have a fever right now. His speech is slurred.

“What do you mean they’ll be mad at you? Of course they won’t.”

“They will. Trust me.”

The office sinks into silence.

Wilbur’s probably just delirious and rambling, Phil thinks. His face is too pale, and speech too unfiltered for him not to have a fever. Still, what Wil says worries him. Again, he gets the sense that there is something under the surface he hasn’t caught onto yet.

Before he can puzzle it out, Wilbur sits bolt upright in his chair.

“Bathroom?” he croaks out.

“Two doors down the hall to your left.”

Wilbur practically flies out of his seat. The door slams shut behind him, and Phil winces.

Shit. That can’t be good.

Sure enough, when Wilbur returns, his face is somehow even pastier. He stands just inside Phil’s door and sways, dangerously, like he’s about to keel over.

“I t’rew up in your bathroom,” he slurs, and Phil can’t decide if he finds this whole situation more comical or worrying. Maybe a little bit of both.

“That’s alright. I think you should go back to your dorm, Wil. Get some rest. Want me to call someone for you?”

He doesn’t know why he bothers to ask. As he speaks, he’s already pulling his phone out from his pocket and opening his contacts.

“No,” Wilbur says, “I can go—” He coughs, thick and wet, and has to lean against the doorframe to catch his breath.

Phil shakes his head. “Nah, I’m calling someone for you. Just to make sure you get back to your dorm okay.”

He scrolls through his contacts. There’s Kristin, but she’s at home. There’s Niki, who is on campus, but she’s probably busy working the library’s circulation desk right now. Phil could walk him himself, but he knows Techno will be in at... Wait. *Techno*.

Techno answers on the third ring.

“Phil?”

“Hey Techno. I’ve got someone here who could use your help.”

---

Wilbur hates being sick. He’s sick constantly anyway, but getting a cold or a fever or the flu on top of that... it sucks. Usually, when he’s at home, his mom will force him into bed and not let him up until he’s better. It takes his body a little longer to fight off infections, so that time frame can be anywhere between five days to three weeks. Sometimes, if it’s on the longer side, a trip to the hospital will be included. Either way, being trapped in a room by himself is hell, and Wilbur hates it.

He hates feeling sick more.

Techno walks him back to the dorm from Phil's office, and every thirty seconds Wilbur has to swallow back the bile threatening to escape. He can't tell if this is from the fountain or his disease, anymore. It certainly feels like more than what he's been dealing with for the past few years, but maybe that's the result of his skipped treatments finally catching up with him.

Either way, he feels horrible, so he lets Techno swipe him into his dorm and lead him upstairs. They take the elevator, which is probably a bad idea since Wilbur's stomach is still roiling and Techno is now confined in a tiny, metal enclosure with him, but they make it to the second floor without incident, and Wilbur can't help but feel grateful his weary legs didn't have to endure the stairs.

"Which number is yours?" Techno asks.

"Hm?"

"What's your room number?"

"Two hundred eight."

Techno pauses for a second, then leads him down the first hallway to the right. Wilbur's door is halfway down the hall, and when they get to it, Techno uses Wilbur's key to let them in. Once inside, Wilbur crawls up onto his bed and smashes his face into the pillows.

"*Ugghhhhh*, I feel like shit."

"No kidding. What happened to you?"

Wilbur rolls over so he can see Techno's face. Surprisingly, he's not poking around in his stuff. Instead, he's standing awkwardly by the door, shifting back and forth on his feet and watching Wilbur with worried eyes.

"I think it was the fountain," Wilbur sighs. "It was cold as shit that day, and we walked around in wet clothes for half an hour afterward."

"Tommy and I didn't get sick."

"Well then my body just hates me."

He says it like it's a joke, but knows it's not.

Techno hums, and Wilbur snuffles into his sheets. "You can leave now, if you want," he says.

"Are you... you sure you want me to go? You look like crap, Wilbur. Like... really bad."

"Gee, thanks," Wilbur mutters, but Techno continues like he hasn't spoken.

"I can stay. Or... I could walk you to the clinic? Don't you want medicine? Or, like, *something*? Anything?"

Someone to stop this. Someone to take his years of pain away, rip it out of his body so he never has to feel it again. He's *so tired* of feeling it.

"A nap." Wilbur yawns, and pretends he doesn't see Techno's expression pinch.

Wow. He must really look like shit for Techno to look that worried. Or maybe his mom is just used to seeing him like this, so he's not used to seeing anyone react so dramatically anymore.

"I promise I'm fine, Techno. Just caught something from the fountain water," he says. For all he knows, that could be the truth. "I'll text you tomorrow if I'm going to classes or not."

Techno worries his bottom lip between his teeth, then asks, "You sure?"

"Pos'tive."

"Okay. But, just, ah... just text me if you change your mind."

Techno turns and heads for the door, but just as he's about to leave, just as Wilbur's about to finally close his eyes and try to sleep, he turns back around.

"I like your room, by the way."

Techno slips out the door, and Wilbur blinks, surprised, as he realizes this was the first time Techno came to his dorm. Usually they hang out in Techno's room, or the library, or the coffee shop or cafeteria, or somewhere off campus. This was the first time Techno had seen his place.

*Kind of a shit tour*, Wilbur thinks humorously, just before passing out.

## Chapter End Notes

that math scene brought up my unresolved trauma from college algebra. LIFLL! Tommy, I'm so sorry...

comments and kudos are always appreciated! :) thank you for reading!

find me on my [twitter](#) or, if you're feeling it, on [tumblr](#)

This fic is going to start updating every Tuesday, btw!



# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

This is nice, Techno thinks. He could sit up here for ages and never get bored, which is weird, because he's always bored. He drowns himself in books and fictional realities because sometimes he just can't stand the one he's actually in. But here, on a park built for six-year-olds, with his one college and one high school aged friend sitting beside him—he thinks this reality might be okay. It might even be better.

## Chapter Notes

CW: sickness mention, anxiety mention, talk about neglecting food but it's not ED related, talking about death

dw yet. yEt...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Wilbur, stop picking at your food.”

It's been a week since Techno dragged Wilbur out of Phil's office and back to his dorm. He'd practically had to carry him, letting him wrap an arm around his shoulder as he steered him past wary bystanders and through the dorm halls. The stares he'd gotten from people worked *wonders* (read: extreme sarcasm) on his mild social anxiety. But he'd done it, and they'd made it.

And it'd scared him.

Something about Wilbur's ashy and blank face as he'd laid on his dorm bed. Something about the way he'd looked when Techno arrived at the office to pick him up—like he was three seconds away from bursting into tears. Something in between those events had scared him, had wrapped a coil of anxiety around his chest and pulled tight.

Problem was, he didn't know what.

“Sorry, Mom,” Wilbur shoots back at him, obviously not sorry at all. He stops picking the individual seeds out of his strawberries, though. “I'm not really hungry.”

“I'll eat it!” Tommy immediately perks up.

Wilbur slides his plate of strawberries and french toast sticks across the table, and Tommy whoops, excitedly digging in.

“I luv fr’anch tost stiz,” he mumbles around a mouthful of food.

Techno grins, but he can’t ignore the lingering worry still tugging at him. Wilbur only recently started to get over whatever illness he’d contracted, but even though he seemed to be getting better—getting up in the mornings, going out with them to the cafeteria, returning to classes—this is the third meal Techno’s seen him brush aside.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Wilbur nods. “Yeah, I’m fine. Still a little sick, is all. Do you guys still want to go to the park later? I think the fresh air might help.”

Techno recognizes the subject change for what it is, but decides not to push. He knows Wilbur. If it was really serious, Wilbur would tell him. Maybe not Tommy, definitely not Phil, but he’d tell Techno.

“Sure,” Tommy says, stabbing another french toast stick and swirling it in syrup. “I think it might rain later, though. My mom made me bring an umbrella.”

“Well we’re not having round two of Sickbur, so Wil, you better bring one too.”

When Wilbur starts to scowl, Techno raises a hand. “Uh uh, I literally dragged you back to your dorm last week. I won’t be doing it again. You’re bringing an umbrella. And a coat. It’s still cold out.”

To Techno’s surprise, Wilbur doesn’t fight back. Instead, he stares at him for a moment before snorting.

“You should really meet my mom,” he says, grinning, as he grabs his plastic cup of water and gives it a swirl. “She’d love you.”

---

The park is just down the street and over Gate Bridge, but they take Wilbur’s truck anyway, just in case the gray sky above does decide to open up and drown them.

“Last one there’s failing Videography!” Tommy calls as he hops out of the car and takes off across the grass toward the bridge. There was no official parking lot for the park, so Wilbur had pulled into the McDonald’s lot next door.

“I’m failing anyway,” Wilbur calls back to him, but Tommy’s so far ahead he barely hears.

Gate Bridge’s wooden planks creak beneath his feet as he darts across and onto the playground. Gateway Park is small, but it’s got all the essentials. There’s a swing set in the

corner, and the main playset towers above him, complete with two different slides, a rock wall, a spinning tire swing, and a fake lookout that Tommy would have to quite literally squeeze himself up to. He's not as small as he once was.

The turf is made of smooth pebbles, though the park is so underused that grass and weeds have started springing through. Tommy plucks a yellow dandelion and carries it with him as he makes his way toward the last, and most important part of the playground: the monkey bars.

When he was eight, he fell off the monkey bars at school and broke his arm for the first time. That was also the day he met Tubbo, because it was Tubbo's idea to be on the monkey bars in the first place. They'd been crawling across the top together, pretending to be super spies on a mission to stop the tall, frizzy haired kid on the slides from taking their precious mulch collection, when Tommy's hand had slipped through the rungs and he'd gone plummeting to the ground below.

He doesn't remember much after that. He remembers saying he was in level 9 pain at the hospital, and crying, and Tubbo's frantic eyes staring down at him through the bars just after he hit the ground. But he doesn't actually remember what it felt like. He doesn't remember what it was like to hit the mulch, or for the bone to break.

He supposes it's good that he remembers more of the happy stuff. Otherwise, how in the world would he be able to climb the monkey bars again?

He's gotten taller since he was eight. Now, he can reach the highest bar without even going on his tiptoes.

Carefully, he grips the bars and swings himself up.

"Techno! Watch this!" he shouts right before flipping upside down. The world spins over, and he laughs as all the cars rushing past on the street suddenly become anti-gravity.

"Child," Techno calls back from the bridge. He and Wilbur are still making their way across—slow pokes. He'll just have to speed things up a little.

His arms are just barely long enough to reach the ground, but he manages to scoop up a handful of pebbles while dangling upside down. When Techno and Wilbur get close enough to the end of the bridge, Tommy lets a couple loose at them.

"Hey!" Techno exclaims as a pebble hits him square in the shin.

"Ow!" Wilbur says a moment later. Tommy can't help it. He giggles, then laughs, then snorts as Wilbur turns back to him, fury mixed with amusement in his eyes.

"Oh you're so on, Tommy Innit," he says.

---

The Gate Park Pebble Fight lasts a brief ten minutes. Mostly because Tommy calls it quit after being pelted only a few times, but also because people on the sidewalks have started to stare. They climb up to the lookout space on top of the playground, and let their feet dangle through the bars as they sit together instead.

“My fuckin’ arm hurts now,” Tommy complains, leaning against Techno’s side. “Wilbur nerfed me right in the bone.”

“At least I didn’t nail you in the back. My god. It felt like a bullet hit me.”

“How would you know? Have you been hit by a bullet before, Wilbur? Are you secretly part of the FBI? If you are, you have real *shit* aim—”

Wilbur cuts Tommy off with an elbow to the ribs, and Techno laughs as the child crumples into him. From the past ten minutes, he’s learned Tommy has a *ridiculously* low pain tolerance.

“*Jesus mannn!* I’m gonna go home covered in bruises, and when my mom asks who beat me up I’m going to tell her it was you.”

“You do that.”

Tommy scowls from where he’s curled himself protectively next to Techno, but a second later Wilbur is wrapping his arms around him in a hug, and his whole body loosens.

“Sorry I beat you up,” Wilbur says, squishing his cheek into Tommy’s hair.

“Sorry I shot you with a bullet.”

“Sorry I did none of that, and have not done a single bad thing ever,” Techno adds on.

It’s only quiet for a second before the lookout erupts into giggles.

This is nice, Techno thinks. He could sit up here for ages and never get bored, which is weird, because he’s always bored. He drowns himself in books and fictional realities because sometimes he just can’t stand the one he’s actually in. But here, on a park built for six-year-olds, with his one college and one high school aged friend sitting beside him—he thinks this reality might be okay.

It might even be better.

---

That night, Techno’s study session is interrupted by a knock at his dorm room door. He never gets visitors—ever, unless they’re hall staff checking to make sure his room is still occupied (i.e. that he hasn’t died and been left to rot without their notice). So he’s understandably nervous as he slinks toward the door and looks through the peephole.

Wilbur Soot—armed with a guitar case and a putridly bright yellow woolen sweatshirt—stands on the other side.

Techno swings open the door. “Wil? What are you doin’ here?”

Wilbur shifts on his feet. His eyes twinkle deviously. “I have an idea, and I want you to come with me.”

“How did you even get inside? You can’t swipe in unless you live here.”

“Sally let me in. She lives upstairs.”

“Sally?”

“The girl from the coffee shop, remember?”

“You still talk to her?”

“Of course I still talk to her. I just don’t say anything while I’m with you guys because I know Tommy would be like ‘*memememe* you’re in love *mememe* when’s the wedding?’ Now are you coming or not?”

There’s hardly a moment’s breath between Wilbur’s words. He stands outside the door, quietly panting, as Techno gapes at him.

Finally, Techno’s jaw clicks shut. “I’m—I’m in pajamas, Wilbur.”

“Yeah? So? Grab a jacket and shoes and let’s go.”

Wilbur turns away from the door, and Techno scrambles for his shoes and coat. He has no idea what this is. No idea why Wilbur’s shown up at his dorm room at—he glances at the neon red numbers on his alarm clock—ten past midnight, but he’s here and he’s leaving and apparently he wants Techno to come with him.

Techno practically jams his feet into tennis shoes, then skids out the door after Wilbur.

“Where are we going?” he asks as they take the elevators down.

He only lives on the second floor, like Wilbur, but Wilbur’s been adamant on not taking the stairs ever since he got over being sick. Techno wonders if the illness took it out of him. He’s certainly been moving slower, recently. Like he’s in pain.

“You’ll see.”

“What kind of answer is that? Am I being kidnapped?”

“No. Calm yourself, have some... blue.” Wilbur snags a sticker off his guitar case—it’s bright blue and has the words ‘Keep Calm and Play Guitar’ on it—and slaps it onto Techno’s shirt.

“What?”

The elevator dings, and Techno trails Wilbur through the lobby and out onto the sidewalk. It’s dark outside. Crickets chirp in the grass around them, and the only light comes from the moon and the bright white street lanterns lining the sidewalks. Faintly, Techno can hear Main Street bustling with cars. Even at midnight, a college town never sleeps.

“Wilbur, I left studying biology for this. I have a quiz tomorrow. This better be good.”

“It is.”

“Why don’t I trust you.”

“Because you’re a little baby man.”

That, somehow, successfully glues Techno’s mouth shut for the rest of the trek there.

They wind up going to the STEM building. Techno makes a face and wrinkles his nose in disdain as Wilbur leads him up the steps, but as soon as they’re indoors his act drops away. The STEM building is *huge*. A giant, mock solar system dangles from the entryway ceiling, and constellations are charted on the walls. As they walk further into the building, Techno notices there’s a giant version of the Periodic Table painted across the floor, and wooden stairs that double as benches create a clear path to the second story. Wilbur, of course, bypasses those for the elevator. The *mega* elevator. The elevator that is *so incredibly big* it’s practically the size of Techno’s entire dorm room.

“I can’t believe this is where my tuition money’s been going all these years,” Techno mumbles, staring at himself in the elevator’s silvery walls.

“Really makes you wish they’d at least make the liberal arts’ elevator run properly, doesn’t it?”

Techno laughs right as the doors open back up.

The fourth floor is mostly the same. Various letters and numbers in rainbow colors dangle from the ceiling as Wilbur and Techno snake their way through the halls. It’s quiet—eerily quiet. So quiet Techno can hear the fluorescent lights buzzing. But, finally, Wilbur opens a glass door out onto a concrete balcony, and the two of them step outside.

No automatic lights flick on when they walk out. The outside world remains stiflingly dark, especially now that they’re high up, far above the softly glowing streetlamps below. Wilbur sits down—not on a chair, but on the floor—and Techno joins him.

“So what are we doing here?” he asks, watching Wilbur unzip his guitar case. “Tell me you did not just pull me out here to play your music at twelve a.m.”

“I did not just pull you out here to play my music at twelve a.m. I also came to look at the stars.”

“The stars?”

For the first time since walking outside, Techno looks up. The sky is quiet and dark, but the longer he stares, the more stars appear. At first, it's like a light smattering of freckles. Then the freckles turn to glitter, and the glitter turns to constellations, and then a whole universe opens up in front of Techno's eyes.

"Whoa," he mumbles.

"The light pollution is surprisingly low in this part of town. Perks of going to college near a forest, I guess." Wilbur shrugs.

"I never see this many back home."

"Me neither."

For a moment, they just sit there, taking it all in. Then Wilbur starts plucking at the strings of his guitar. The sound vibrates, shaking the very air they occupy.

Techno leans back against the balcony's concrete barrier and keeps his head to the stars as Wilbur plays. If he tries, he can sort of chart out the constellations. He took an Astrology class in high school, and remembers enough to find Orion's Belt and follow it to Taurus, to Gemini, and finally to Sirius down below them all. He doesn't remember more than that, but he figures there have to be hundreds of other constellations up there.

Wilbur keeps playing, some soft song Techno doesn't recognize.

*He's good*, Techno thinks as he closes his eyes and listens. *Really good.*

It isn't the first time he's thought this. He's heard Wilbur play before, many times, and he's always been impressed. It shouldn't be surprising, considering he's a music major, but this is the first time Techno's heard him play like *this*—taking it seriously, strumming quietly, just for them to hear. Usually Wilbur's messing around, strumming loud, funky patterns to make him and Tommy laugh. This song is quiet.

"Have you ever considered playin' a show?" Techno asks.

Wilbur looks up. "A show?"

"Like, you know how they have open mic nights? Don't they have that for instruments, too?"

"Like busking?"

Wilbur's eyes—even as tired as they look, out past midnight—glitter humorously. Techno huffs.

"I don't know! Something like that?"

Wilbur laughs as he turns back to the strings. "Yeah, I've thought about it. I actually wanted to start a band."

"Really? You should."

“Eh.” Wilbur shrugs again, and readjusts the guitar in his lap. It twangs as he fiddles with one of the tuning pegs. “I thought about it. I wanted to do it, maybe be something big in the long run, y’know? But I think... even if I never accomplish those things, I’d be okay with it. I’d be okay with just being a tiny speck, standing alone on the edge of the world. Eaten by time.”

Wilbur shoots a grin at him, and Techno recognizes the words for what they are: a reference to John Keat’s “When I have fears that I may cease to be” poem from the beginning of the semester. The very first poem they’d talked about. The one that—unintentionally or not—had pulled them together.

He frowns anyway. “You’re more than a tiny speck to me and Tommy.”

“I know,” Wilbur says, waving a hand. “That poem was bullshit. Even when the whole world ends, it’s not like this shit never happened. And sure, it’s good to realize that anxiety about not doing enough before you die is useless, because we’re on a floating rock and like... who cares? But I feel like I’ve done enough just by existing. Like I don’t have to worry about dying before my time because I’ve already accomplished enough just by being here. Just by breathing and talking and doing stupid stuff like this. Existing is enough of an accomplishment, I think. And— What?”

Techno leans over his knees, finally letting loose the laughter he’s been holding back. He can feel Wilbur staring at him, but can’t help it. When he regains enough breath to speak, he says, “I thought you hated analyzing dead white men’s poetry?”

“Oh fuck off,” Wilbur says, raising a middle finger. But a second later they’re both snickering, sinking down to the concrete and laying side by side.

“I fucking hate English majors. Can’t even express my own opinions in peace.”

“That is every single one of my literature classes in a nutshell.”

“I’m done critiquing art. Never again.”

“Well, to make you feel better, you were really *agreeing* with art, because Keats—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up!”

Techno laughs and tries to get away as Wilbur starts viciously swatting his shoulder.

“Stupid. Fucking. English. Pretentious. Fuck.”

“Stop! Stop!”

Wilbur laughs, but listens. He ceases his attack, and Techno scoots back over on the concrete.

“So what do *you* want to do before you die?” Wilbur asks.

“Wilbur. I’m twenty years old. I don’t even know what I want for breakfast tomorrow.”



“Fuck you. Have pancakes. Now think theoretically! If I told you a campus bus was going to kill you tomorrow—”

“Nooooo. My free tuition...”

“If a campus bus killed you tomorrow, turned you into one of those pancakes you ate for breakfast, what would you have wanted to accomplish?”

“I feel like this is a trick question, considering what your answer was.”

“Techno!”

“Okay! Okay! My god, you get existential past midnight. Uh... I guess it’d be nice to have published a book. Just one. Just to get my name out there. But I think I already accomplished what I really wanted to.”

Wilbur tilts his head. “What’s that?”

“At the park today, when the three of us were sitting on that lookout? Don’t laugh. It was just... that was nice. Half the time I feel like I’m walking around with this sheet over my eyes, y’know? Everythin’s a little gray, a little fuzzy. Not in a bad way, necessarily. Just in an ‘everythin’s movin’ so quick I can’t pay attention to it all’ type thing. But today didn’t feel like that.”

The balcony falls silent when Techno finishes. Crickets replace the noise, chirping their frenzied orchestra down below. It’s beautiful, Techno thinks. Reality behind the gray sheet is stunningly vivid. The trees look greener, and the sky looks clearer, and Techno feels like he’s been stuck wearing blinders until this semester.

It’s easy to get caught up. In exams, in homework, in the never-ending rush of day to day life. Techno’s reached the age where these things can reach out and latch onto him. Where he can become a perfectionist in his coursework and forget what he’s doing this coursework for. Where he can produce and produce but forget, for a moment, that he’s not a machine. He’s not meant to be perfect. He’s human, and human’s can make mistakes. It’s a hazard of living. It’s a hazard of trying to make Capital A Art.

If he could have made one thousand poems while the world looked gray, he could make one million more now.

Wilbur draws an arm back behind his head. “You should publish a book on polar bears.”

Techno snorts. “Why polar bears?”

“I dunno. Sounds fun. You could go out to the Arctic with a camera and study them.”

“Imagine I came back with a pet polar bear.”

“No wait, you should definitely do that. Bring back a polar bear named Steve and register him as a service animal on campus.”

“Steve would die in this climate.”

“What would *he* last like to do? His final parting wish.”

Techno shrugs. “Eat fish, probably.”

The balcony is cold and grounding beneath him, and the sky above is endlessly wide. In that moment, the only thing connecting finite and the infinite together is him and Wilbur. Their perception. Their existence.

“Silly, stupid creature,” Wilbur says fondly. And Techno smiles.

Techno doesn't get back to his dorm until two a.m. that morning. He passes out on his bed over the piles of textbooks he'd accumulated there, and wakes up with an index card stuck to his face. He's tired, he hasn't studied nearly as much as he wanted to, and he's going to be late.

For the first time in his life, he doesn't really mind.

## Chapter End Notes

ok this chapter made ME cry. LIFLL!Techno is me. Me is him.

ANYWAY! thank you guys sm for reading. as always, comments and kudos are ALWAYS ALWAYS appreciated!! I love hearing your thoughts!

also, if you're interested, I post more about writing/fic/mcyc on my [twitter](#) and [tumblr](#) :)) drop a follow if you want!

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

His words are precise. His words were purposefully chosen. They matter. That's when it clicks, for Techno. Something in his brain shifts, changing directions in a way that's irreversible and inevitable. Something in Wilbur's sobbed words hurtles towards him—a train on a track—and as the whistle blows, Techno realizes. Something is terribly, horribly wrong.

## Chapter Notes

So... Hello,

In light of recent events, I thought it was important to put this note here for you all to read before you continue.

This fic attempts to broach and discuss the very difficult topic of grief and loss of a loved one. At no point will I depict/describe an actual death scene (that was a choice purposefully made months ago), but this fic WILL contain death and its aftermath. I chose not to use archive warnings when I started because I thought making it obvious would ruin the tension (and I was sort of in denial about what was going to happen, too), but it is FAR more important that you all stay safe.

I finished drafting this fic on the first week of June, so it's been complete in my docs for a while now. I debated putting it to the side after what happened this past week, but, ultimately, my goal with this fic is to provide hope and an appreciation for life—no matter how short—and to show how we, the ones left, continue living on. Reading over the rest of my draft brought me a surprising amount of comfort and validation in how I was feeling, and I /like/ the overall message I decided put out. So, I will continue to post, but I will absolutely not be upset if you choose to dip out now. Take care of yourselves, okay? <3

That said, this chapter is probably the roughest one. Here are the chapter CWs.

CWs: sickness, vomiting, talk of death, seizure, hospitals, mentions of anxiety.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

About a week later, Wilbur wakes up feeling like absolute shit. It's a weekend, Saturday, so he doesn't have class, but he's supposed to meet Techno and Tommy at the student center coffee shop later, and then drive them to some diner downtown where Tommy wants to see a stand up comedy show being hosted.

He takes one step out of bed, and internally thinks “There’s no way in hell I’m going to make it that long.”

He does. Somehow, miraculously—and maybe a little bit because he’s downed several ibuprofen—he makes it to the student center, to the car, and manages to drive them all down to Puffy’s Diner. Techno asks him if he’s okay once, while they’re on the road and his hands are locked in a death grip with the steering wheel, but he smiles and promises he’s fine.

Somehow, Techno believes him.

They walk inside and take a seat toward the back of the diner’s crowd. At the front of the restaurant, a small, wooden stage takes up a quarter of the space. The tables are all scattered around it, and string lights dangle from the rafters above. It looks sort of like a barn turned diner, except minus the hay and animals.

“Are we getting food?” Tommy asks, flipping through a laminated menu.

“I’m getting a burger,” Techno says. “This place is supposed to be really good.”

“They have pancakes!”

“Really? What kind?”

“Original, chocolate chip, pineapple, blueberry, banana...”

“Wil, are you gonna get anything?” Techno turns to him, snapping him out of the zone he’d fallen into.

He reaches down to scratch his arm, and shakes his head. “No. I ate breakfast right before coming to the student center, so I’m not hungry.”

It’s a lie. It’s such a lie, because even the smell of food is making Wilbur nauseous right now. But he lies and Techno believes it yet again, so all he winds up ordering is a water.

The show starts, and their table falls into relative silence for the next fifteen minutes. Tommy looks over every so often to grin, or make a quip, or laugh and check to see if they’re laughing too. They always are, of course. Even Wilbur finds a genuine smile each time he looks over, despite how every minute that passes has him feeling worse and worse. He wants to go home and lay down. He wants to take a nap. He wants to get out of this crowded restaurant. But Tommy’s eyes are wide and bright, utterly elated as they follow the comedian around the stage, and Wilbur can’t bring himself to stand up and leave.

After the show, Tommy heads up to the front to talk to the comedian, while Techno and Wilbur stay behind. Wilbur watches as the blond bobs and weaves his way to the front of the room—narrowly avoiding a waiter walking past with a tray full of drinks as he makes a beeline for the stage. Wilbur thinks it should be easier to lose him in the crowd, easier for him to disappear, but it’s not. It’s ridiculously easy to spot the kid amongst others. Besides the fact that he is quite tall, he’s like a ray of fucking sunshine everywhere he goes. Even without the

ridiculously red hoodie he wore the first day they met, he still manages to pull everyone's attention.

"You know Tommy told me he wanted to be a comedian, once?" Techno asks.

Wilbur tears his eyes off Tommy and turns back to the table. "Huh?"

"A comedian. That's why he wanted to come today, because he's really into comedy."

Wilbur tilts his head. "Really? That's surprisingly... fitting."

"That's what I said! Apparently his friends told him it was dumb."

"Nah. Nothing's dumb when you live on a floating rock. Besides, he'd be good at it. He's really good in Videography class. He could start his own YouTube channel."

"Don't even remind me about Videography," Techno huffs. "The final is coming in a few weeks and I'm not ready."

"Me neither. And my British Lit final poem is about to be due."

"Is it finished?"

"Yes. But it's shit, and I haven't edited."

"I thought Phil was helping you?"

Wilbur levels Techno with as flat a look as he can muster. "Phil is not God, Techno. He can help. Not perform miracles."

Techno rolls his eyes, but says nothing more on the topic. Finals, thankfully, are a topic they both don't want to talk about. There's still quite a few weeks until they're due, anyway. Not until the very end of April.

Techno leans back in his chair and kicks his feet forward. "Did you know Tommy's birthday is next week?"

Wilbur nods. "Like he'd let me forget."

"I don't know what to get him," Techno admits. "Was thinkin', though, and what if we went somewhere? Like, when we drove to the city for spring break? That was fun. We could go over a weekend instead of on his actual birthday."

Wilbur hums, but doesn't agree nor disagree. Something sticky and black, like tar, is pooling in his stomach. He's been feeling progressively worse and worse all day, and there's this swirling spiral in the back of his head that thinks: "What if I don't make it to then?"

It's probably irrational. There's no way he's running at 100%—of course he isn't, it's been weeks since he last went to the doctors—but they'd flushed at least a little of the toxins out last time. Surely, that had bought him a little extra time. They were still trying to find him a

donor. He was still on the list. If he just held on a little longer... even if he'd decided it wasn't worth it long ago...

"Wilbur?"

Wilbur blinks, snapping out of his thoughts to find Techno staring at him, brow creased. Tommy stands beside him, cheeks flushed and eyes bright, but mouth corners tipped down.

*Tommy was done talking to the comedian already? How long had he been zoned out for?*

"You okay?" Techno asks. "We're ready to go if you are."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. I'm fine. Just have a little bit of a headache."

"I'd offer you ibuprofen, but I ran out yesterday."

"It's fine." Wilbur waves Techno off, and pushes himself up from his chair.

Shit. He *really* doesn't feel good. There's this pain in his back that won't go away, and his stomach is churning. The world around him all feels a little fuzzy. A little off kilter.

"Let's go," he says anyway, and heads for the door. The sooner they get out of here and back to the dorms, the better. He can take meds, cool off, maybe take a nap?

They trail out of the diner, and Wilbur tries to ignore the way his head and body both ache as climb into his truck and head back to campus.

"He was so nice," Tommy says on the way back, rambling excitedly about his talk with the comedian. "I told him I thought of picking comedy up as a career, or at least something fun to do on the side if I do film, and he said I should go for it. He told me comedy and film go really well together, and with the internet being such a huge thing, it'd be a really good way to make money if it kicks off."

"Wil and I said you should start a YouTube channel," Techno notes. "People watch that all the time."

"Oh my god, that'd be sick! I could make videos on campus, going up to random people or something and just asking them stupid questions. That'd be hilarious."

"See how many people believe the stupid facts Wilbur made up when he gave you that campus tour."

Tommy wheezes and leans forward to slap the back of the front passenger seat, where Techno's sitting. "Yes! Yes!"

"You should wear that stupid Minecraft costume you have in your closet. I saw that, by the way," Wilbur says.

"Oh yes! I'll do it in exchange for your user subscription."

“I’d sub to you.”

“I’d sub,” Techno adds, smirking. “It’d be worth it to see you embarrassing yourself around campus.”

“Joke’s on you. Big Men don’t get embarrassed.”

By the time they make it back to campus, Tommy’s died laughing over about a dozen different video ideas, and desperately has to pee. Since Wilbur’s dorm is closest—and also since he has ibuprofen there—they park outside and all head in together.

Wilbur holds himself together as best he can, smiling whenever Tommy or Techno look over, and laughing along with their stupid ideas. He can’t ignore the sinking, clawing sensation in his stomach, though. The alarm bells sounding in his brain that *something is off, something is wrong, you need to do something to fix this*.

He lets them all into his room, and while Techno starts exploring and Tommy darts off to the bathroom down the hall, he shields his phone with his hand and texts his mom.

WILBUR: Mom, I think something’s really wrong.

He waits a couple seconds. Ten seconds. Thirty seconds. A minute.

No response comes, and the pit in Wilbur’s stomach expands further.

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Techno’s only been in Wilbur’s room once before, when he’d dropped him off the day he was sick, so when Wilbur lets him in this time he takes his time exploring. In his professional college student opinion, a person’s college dorm room says a lot about them. He already feels like he knows a lot about Wilbur, but there are some things he catches that are new. Like the record collection under his bed, or the picture of him and a little kid with bright ginger hair standing on a beach. The kid can’t be any older than three, and a younger Wilbur is balancing him on his hip. They both sport beaming grins, and written on the frame are the words “Wilbur and Fundy - Florida Beach Day.” Above it, on a second shelf, is a stack of books. Techno runs his finger along them, noting the titles.

“Percy Jackson?”

Wilbur hums.

“I like those books, too. Why’re they so dusty.”

“I don’t read much.”

“I can see,” Techno snorts. He flicks the dust from his fingers and moves on to the next shelf. “You have... you have a classic?”

“I figured I might as well try, uh, reading it. Right? Cause you suggested it to me. That day at the... the fountain?”

Behind Techno, the bed squeaks as Wilbur leans up against it, but he barely hears. His eyes are glued to the crimson cover of the book; stuck like the globs of syrup Wilbur used to drip all over his textbook pages. The words *The Catcher in the Rye*, gold and italicized, gleam back at him. The cover is clean of stains, and there’s a bookmark three-quarters of the way through. Unfinished, but started.

“Wil, you—”

Techno turns back around, and that’s when he realizes Wilbur is no longer standing behind him. Instead, he’s sitting on the ground, back pressed to his wooden dresser and knees pulled to his chest. His head leans back against the dresser, and his forehead is pinched, eyes squeezed shut in pain.

“Wilbur? Oh god, Wilbur? What’s wrong?”

“Fuck,” Wilbur breathes out. He brings both hands to his stomach and curls over them. “Shit. I didn’t- I didn’t think it was this bad. Can you... grab me the trash bin? I’m gonna—”

Wilbur takes another quick inhale, then chokes, then gags.

It’s instinct how quickly Techno’s feet unstick from the floor. In a flash, he’s across the room, grabbing the trash can, and shoving it under Wilbur’s nose just before he empties his stomach into it. It’s horrible retching, and Techno winces and politely looks away as Wilbur sputters and spits.

The door flies open.

“Hey guys! I’m back! Wil, your bathroom is out of paper towels, so I had to— Wil?”

Tommy freezes in the entryway, and the door, forgotten, slams shut behind him.

Wilbur sucks in a shuddering inhale, then leans back and presses his head to the dresser again. Techno is startled to see tears building in his eyes.

“What happened?” Tommy asks, glancing desperately from Techno’s face to Wil’s and then back again.

“I don’t know. I think Wilbur’s sick. Did you eat somethin’ funny this morning?”

“No.” Wilbur’s voice wavers, and Techno only has that split second of warning before Wil dissolves fully into tears. “No, Techno. I— It hurts. It’s been hurting all day, but I didn’t think —”

“What hurts?”

“Everything. My... My *kidney*.”



Poets are precise. They pick words that say exactly what they need them to say, when they need them to say it, because with so little space, every syllable—no matter how small—has to matter. Has to mean something. It's like walking a tightrope. One toe out of line, one imperfect wobble, and the act is ruined.

Wilbur's explanation is such a strangely specific thing to say. And the way he says it, like it contains a gravity far stronger than anything Techno has grasped yet, reminds him of poetry. His words are precise. His words were purposefully chosen. They *matter*.

That's when it clicks, for Techno. Something in his brain shifts, changing directions in a way that's irreversible and inevitable. Something in Wilbur's sobbed words hurtles towards him—a train on a track—and as the whistle blows, Techno realizes.

*Something is terribly, horribly wrong.*

"What can I do?" Is the first thing Techno asks.

Wilbur snuffles into his hands. It takes him a moment to stop the flood of tears enough to speak, but when he does, he hoarsely says, "Hospital. You're gonna have to take me to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

Tommy's voice wavers, and Techno turns to him. He's still standing, frozen like a deer in headlights in the middle of the doorway. His hands, hung in tense fists at his sides, drip water down to the carpet as terrified eyes flicker between Techno and Wilbur. He's still young, Techno remembers. Only seventeen.

"It's okay, Tommy," he says, even though the swirling, sinking feeling in his gut tells him otherwise. "Get your stuff."

Tommy's face has gone pale, but he does as he's told.

Less than a minute later, Techno is helping hoist Wilbur off the floor. He wraps one arm under his shoulders, and they stumble out the doorway and down the stairwell together.

"Should I just call an ambulance?" Techno asks as they walk. Wilbur is leaning heavily against him, so heavily Techno thinks he may be about to pass out, but Wilbur shakes his head.

"No. Mom can't afford it."

"Wilbur—" Techno can't really afford to feel panicked right now, as the only adult not currently on the verge of losing consciousness, but he does. "—Wilbur, I can't *drive*."

"... Learn how."

"Asshole," Techno says, but his voice shakes.

They exit the building through the back door, and Techno stops for a second to fish out his phone. “Tommy, c’mere,” he says.

Tommy has been utterly silent ever since Techno told him to get his stuff. It’s probably the quietest he’s ever been in his life, Techno thinks. But he needs to make a phone call, and Tommy’s the only one not currently supporting dead weight.

“Call Phil,” he says, then shoves his phone into Tommy’s hands.

“What do I say?”

“Tell him it’s an emergency, and we need a ride to the hospital.”

While Tommy’s dialing, Techno walks Wilbur over to a bench and sits him down. They’re in relative shade, hidden back behind the dorm where the back exit leads out. Wilbur slumps over himself to put his head in his hands, and Techno sits beside him.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

Wilbur snuffles. “I fucked up.”

As much as Techno likes a concise answer, that really doesn’t tell him much.

“How did you fuck up?”

Wilbur looks up at him. Recently, his eyes have always looked a little tired, a little worn, but this is the first time Techno thinks he’s seen them this dull. They look sunken, and in the sun the bags under his eyes look like bruises. He wonders how he didn’t notice them before. He wonders why the Wilbur in the photo upstairs looked less familiar than this one.

“Techno, I have CKD.”

Techno squints at him. “Huh?”

“CKD. Chronic Kidney Disease. It came from Lupus I got when I was younger, which decided to fuck up my kidneys.”

“What does that mean?”

“My kidneys don’t work, Techno. And I stopped— I stopped going to treatments regularly until the Sunday before spring break. Then I went back again, but it’s too late— All the toxins are fucking building up and I can’t get a donor and so I stopped again a week after we got back and—”

Wilbur dissolves into tears again. Amidst them, he chokes out, “I’m gonna die, Techno.”

The swirling, dark pit in Techno’s stomach opens up even further. His heart slams into it, and for a second he’s so lightheaded he can’t even breathe. Then he sees Tommy approaching, phone held to his ear, and he swallows back that fear.

“You’re going to be fine. Just hold on. Phil will drive us.”

Tommy hands the phone to him, and Techno hurries to press it to his ear. “Phil?”

“Techno? I’m on my way right now. How is he? Tommy sounded— I mean—”

Techno glances over at Wilbur. He’s still crying, but silently now. He looks awfully pale.

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“Okay. That’s fine. You guys will be alright. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want me to stay on the phone?”

Techno hesitates. He should be able to handle this on his own. It’s just Wilbur and Tommy, and Wilbur—apart from sobbing and saying he’s going to die—is not doing anything more than sitting on the bench. He should be able to handle this.

“Can you stay?” he asks anyway.

“Of course.”

---

Phil gets there in little more than a minute, as promised. Techno directs his car to a curb near where they are, and watches as Phil practically flies out the driver’s side door.

“God, Wilbur,” he says once he’s gotten close enough to kneel down in front of him. “You’ll be fine, okay? Can you walk?”

Wilbur takes a shaky breath in. In the time it took for Phil to cross campus, Techno’s noticed his gaze slipping, like he’s zoning out. He’s not crying anymore, but Techno doesn’t know if he should feel comforted by that.

“I dunno,” Wilbur mumbles. “I feel bad.”

“I know. Where?”

When Wilbur doesn’t respond, Techno answers for him. “He told me he’s got CKD, Phil. From Lupus. And he hasn’t been doing his treatments.”

“What? Why not?” Phil’s attention darts hurriedly back to Wilbur, but Wil just shrugs.

“Na’ worth it if they’re never gonna find a donor. I thought. But I—”

Tears begin to build in Wilbur’s eyes again, and Phil cuts him off with a hand to his knee.

“It’s fine, Wilbur. You’ll be fine. We just have to get you to the car.”

“I can help,” Tommy timidly speaks up from behind them.

Techno’s nearly forgotten he’s there, he’s been so silent. Now, he turns to him and gives him a nod.

“Okay. You take left arm I’ll take right? Phil can get ready to drive.”

Tommy nods, and his face is pale but his eyes determined.

While Phil goes back to the car, Techno and Tommy scoop Wilbur off the bench. To Wilbur’s credit, he actually does try to help them. He walks, for the most part, but his limbs stumble and at one point he has to stop to throw up onto the concrete.

“Sorry,” he mumbles after, as they step around it and keep moving. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Almost there.”

Finally, they make it into Phil’s van. Techno sits with Wilbur in back, while Tommy sits up front with Phil.

If this was any other universe, Techno thinks, he would have rather dropped Tommy off at his house, or left him in the dorms. But it’s not, and now that Tommy is in the car, there’s no point wasting time by kicking him out. Phil starts the van, and they take off down the street.

On the ride there, Wilbur brings his head down to rest on Techno’s shoulder.

“I feel ba’,” he slurs. “Real’ ba’. My head hurts...”

“I know,” Techno says, even though he doesn’t know at all. “We’ll be there soon. The hospital’s only, like, five minutes away.”

Wilbur doesn’t respond, but a few seconds after they turn onto the next road, his hand starts shaking in his lap. Then his arm jerks. Then his head bobs against Techno’s shoulder.

“Phil,” Techno says as Wilbur’s whole body starts to convulse. “*Phil!*”

“Shit,” he hears Phil swear from up front.

Techno’s too busy catching Wilbur’s hand in his own and trying to stop the frantic jerking of his limbs to look up, but he’s assuming Phil looked through the rear-view mirror. “Shit, fuck. Tommy don’t look. Techno, it’s a seizure, just time it. Put his head in your lap, on his side. I’m going to keep driving. The sooner we get there the better.”

“Okay, okay,” Techno says, trying not to panic. He shifts so Wilbur can lay on his side, with his head in Techno’s lap, and waits for the frantic jerking to slow. It doesn’t take long, no more than fifteen seconds, but by the time Wilbur’s body falls still Techno’s heart is pounding.

“Wilbur?” he asks, gently tugging at the shoulder digging into his thigh. “Wil? Can you hear me?”

“Mm...”

“Almost there,” Phil says. “He might be disoriented. Just be gentle, and keep him on his side.”

As if Techno wasn’t going to be gentle. As if Techno wasn’t already treating Wilbur like glass.

“Wil?” he asks again, quieter.

When he gets no response, he leans over the mop of hair in his lap to peek at Wilbur’s face. To his surprise, Wilbur’s eyes are open, and a single tear is leaking down one cheek.

“...I wan’ go home,” Wilbur mumbles.

Phil takes a sharp right, and Techno looks up just in time to catch the Emergency Room Entrance sign flying past.

“Not now,” Techno says. “You can go home later, when you’re feeling better.”

“M tired.”

“Keep him awake,” Phil immediately instructs.

“You can’t sleep yet either. I’m sorry.”

“M sorry,” Wilbur says.

Techno can’t tell what he’s saying it for. He can’t tell if he’s just repeating what Techno’s said, or if he’s actually apologizing for something. Either way, he says,

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

When they pull up to the entrance, Phil parks along the sidewalk and hurries to help Techno get Wilbur out of the car. Tommy tries to follow, but Techno clicks the lock and kicks his door back shut before he can get out.

“Hey!” Tommy shouts through the window. “Let me out! I’m coming with!”

There are tears in his eyes, Techno realizes. He’s never seen a Tommy Innit this frightened. But despite the fear, Tommy pounds on the glass and yanks at the door handle aggressively.

“Techno! Please!” he shouts.

Techno turns to Phil, who’s slipping his arm underneath Wilbur’s shoulder and helping him out. In correlation with Tommy, he’s never seen a Wilbur Soot look this sick. Even the time he dragged him back to his dorm from Phil’s office, he looked better than he looks now. His

half-lidded eyes are glazed with pain and exhaustion, and there are tear tracks streaked down both sides of his terrifyingly pale face. Techno can't even tell if he's here right now. He looks about a blink away from total unconsciousness.

Techno tucks his shoulder under Wilbur's other arm, and looks to Phil.

"I can't let him come," he finds himself saying, rushed. "He's only seventeen. He's a kid."

"He's also Wilbur's friend," Phil replies. "He deserves to come just as much as you do."

Techno thinks of the deer-in-headlights look from earlier, the moment he'd realized in startling clarity just how young Tommy was. Sure, he was about to be eighteen, but Techno's stomach is flip-flopping with anxiety, and he has this stupid need to protect Tommy from that. Maybe it was that day with the math. That hug he got after, when Tommy was still sniffling and just a tiny bit puffy-faced. Techno can't handle seeing that again. Stupidly, he realizes he's slowly started to see Tommy as a little brother. He wants to protect him.

This, strangely, feels like something he needs protection from.

Still, he can't argue with Phil, and Tommy's going to break the glass if he keeps banging on it.

"Come on," Techno calls back, ignoring the sick feeling in his stomach.

Phil unlocks the car using his keys, and Tommy comes flying out after them.

"You massive bitch," he says as soon as he gets close, but he wipes his tears away and slides into place beside Techno without another complaint.

Two nurses greet them at the door. They must have seen them coming, because they have a gurney and are immediately helping Phil transport Wilbur onto it. Techno steps back, unneeded, and Tommy follows him.

"He's got CKD," Phil explains, "but we had no idea until today. He's been kinda in and out of responsiveness and had a seizure on the way here."

"How long?" one of the nurses asks.

Phil steps back and looks to him. "Techno?"

"Um... maybe thirty seconds?"

"Okay, thanks."

Techno's chest squeezes in anxiety, but before he can ask if that's a good sign or not, the nurses are wheeling Wilbur back and he, Phil, and Tommy are told to stay out and wait.

"Um, sorry, can you fill out his medical information?" A lady, short and young looking, asks from behind the front desk. "Or at least give us an emergency contact?"

Phil frowns. Techno swallows around his dry throat and coughs out a, “I don’t have any of his contacts. His name’s Wilbur Soot, though, if that helps. He’s from here.”

“Wilbur Soot?”

Techno nods.

The lady types something up on her computer, then smiles. “Oh, perfect. We’ve had him in before, actually. I’ll just copy this over to the doctors. Have his parents been called?”

“Uh, it’s just his mom, but... no. I don’t think so.”

“Okay, that’s fine. We’ll get on it. You guys feel free to sit down. And let me know if you need water or anything else.”

She’s nice, Techno thinks as he sinks into a chair next to Phil. She’s a little overwhelmingly nice, for the situation, but at least her casual tone makes him feel a little better. She’s obviously used to this. She probably has people stumbling in all the time.

Techno isn’t used to this. And now that Wilbur’s gone, now that he finally doesn’t have to pretend to be the competent adult, and has a chance to breathe, it all sinks in. The dorm, the bench outside, the car. Techno is as confused as he is terrified.

For the first time in a long time, he wants to cry. He doesn’t know what’s going on. He doesn’t know what happened. Wilbur was fine. He was *fine*.

Something squeezes his hand, and he looks down to find his hand had somehow migrated to Tommy’s, and is clutching it so tight both their fingers have gone white.

He doesn’t remember when he grabbed him. He doesn’t remember when Tommy clung back. But he is utterly grateful when he doesn’t let go.

## Chapter End Notes

ahahahahaha \*sweats nervously\* so we've reached thIS part of the fic...

//

comments and kudos are always appreciated! also, if you want emails when I update, consider subbing to the fic or to my ao3.

socials (aka places you can find me nOT torturing your favorite characters.. or at least torturing them less):

[twitter](#)

[tumblr](#)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

When he remembers the drive, when he remembers Phil telling him “Don’t look, Tommy,” and their arrival at the emergency room, when he remembers Phil saying he’d call if anything changed, Tommy’s head spins and he suddenly has the very pronounced urge to vomit.

He doesn’t. Instead, he clicks the ‘answer call’ button.

## Chapter Notes

CW: grief, mcd

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

At some point, a nurse tells them they can go home if they want, and that Wilbur’s mom is on her way.

“You should go back to your dorm, get some rest,” Phil says. “You too Tommy. Go home. See your parents.”

Their hands are still interlaced, and Techno feels Tommy’s hand give him a death-gripping squeeze. He glances at the doors they wheeled Wilbur through, and frowns.

“What if—?” He doesn’t bother finishing. He’s not sure what he was planning to say, in the first place.

“I can stay here,” Phil says. “If anything changes, if I hear anything at all, I’ll text you. And if you want to come back later, after you’ve gotten some sleep, I can call Kristin to pick you guys up. Tommy, can I get your number?”

“Sure.”

Tommy pulls his phone out with the hand not currently jittering in Techno’s hold, and passes Phil the contact screen. Phil types his number and name in, and then Tommy shoots him a quick text so their numbers are exchanged. Once that’s been taken care of, Phil nudges Techno out of his seat.

“Go on,” he says. “There’s a bus to campus at eight fifty, and I’ll be right here.”



So they go. It's a reluctant trudge to the bus stop, and neither of them talk the whole way. They plop down on the shitty, plastic bench under a cracked glass awning and wait.

"How am I supposed to get home?" Tommy asks eventually. "Does the bus run through neighborhoods?"

"I'd call your mom," Techno says. "She or your dad can pick you up outside my place."

"Oh. Okay."

Despite his words, Tommy makes no move for his phone.

It feels like years and simultaneously no time at all passes before the bus arrives. It squeals up to the sidewalk, and, somehow, Techno and Tommy manage to stagger to their feet and climb on. Techno blinks, and suddenly they're on their way back to Essempi University.

Tommy fiddles with the hem of his t-shirt as the bus rumbles under a green light. He's never been this quiet, this buried inside his own head. Techno wants to break the silence, shatter the glass wall, reach inside Tommy's head and yank him back out, but he's not sure how. That's always been Wilbur's area of expertise.

"Do you think Wilbur's going to be okay?" Tommy finally asks.

Techno glances down at him, then shrugs. "I dunno, Tommy."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. He's sick."

Tommy bites his lip and looks down. "Why didn't he tell us?"

For the third time, Techno shakes his head and answers, "I don't know."

They don't have many answers. But when Tommy wraps both arms around his middle and looks away, out the window; when his fingers clench so tight around his shirt that they turn white; when he sucks in a breath only to shudder it out; Techno understands. That, he knows.

They make it back to campus, and Techno sits on the sidewalk with Tommy as he calls his mom to pick him up. It's dark out—the street lights above them the only source of pale white light. Besides that, the sky's been completely blocked out by clouds.

A rough wind shudders through, and Tommy shivers where he's hunched over his phone.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Techno hears him say. "I just need you to pick me up. Techno doesn't drive, and no buses run in that direction."

Someone says something back to him over the phone, and his shoulders slump in relief.

"Thanks, Mom. Yeah... I'll see you soon. I— Oh. Okay. I will. ... Yeah, see you."

Goodbyes are exchanged, and when Tommy hangs up, he turns to look at him.

“What’d she say?” Techno asks, more out of politeness than necessity. He’s pretty sure no parent—especially not Mrs. Innit—would leave their kid alone after they just explained one of their best friends is in the hospital, and now they’re stranded at a university campus.

“She’s coming now. She, uh, wanted me to ask you if you wanted to come home with me, though? So you don’t have to be here all by yourself?”

“Oh. Uh... I’m good. But thank you.”

He tries to ignore the way Tommy’s face seems to fall, just a little bit, at his answer. It’s not like he doesn’t want to stay with Tommy, it’s just... he needs a little time to process this by himself. He needs space to breathe. He needs a place where he doesn’t have to be the adult.

“Okay,” Tommy says.

The area lapses into silence. Wind ruffles Techno’s cropped hair, pushing the pink locks against his neck and cheeks. Tommy, next to him, is still shivering, but Techno has no coat to offer him. He’s in a university sweatshirt, still stained by the coffee he’d had that morning. A morning that feels ages ago.

He should talk. It’s his turn to offer something to the conversation, or to start a new one. Any form of distraction would be nice at this point. But the words stay stubbornly locked in his throat, and by the time Mrs. Innit arrives, the air between them is cold and stale.

“Hi, loves,” Mrs. Innit says as she climbs out of her car. It’s a tiny sedan, nothing like Wilbur’s dusty red pickup truck.

Tommy stands from the pavement, and Techno follows suit.

“Mom,” Tommy says when she’s close enough, and then he’s being pulled close and wrapped in a hug.

Mrs. Innit rubs his arms up and down, squeezing him tight. “Honey, you’re freezing. Are you alright?”

Tommy nods his head into her shoulder, but doesn’t let go.

Techno stands awkwardly to the side, twiddling his thumbs and waiting for them to be done. He’s not sure what he’s going to do once they leave. Go inside? He technically has laundry to do. And studying. He’s got a review to finish for biology, and a conclusion to write for his classical literature essay. Phil said he’d call him if anything changed, so he should be able to afford sitting down, working on things. They’re due tomorrow.

“Techno?”

Techno blinks and looks up. Mrs. Innit is looking at him, Tommy squeezed to her side.

“You sure you don’t want to come home with us? We’ve got a spare room if you don’t want to share with Tommy.”

Techno pulls a smile, but shakes his head. “No, that’s alright. Thanks, though.”

“Of course. Tom’s friends are always welcome in our house. Can I at least get your number? That way, if you need anything, you have one more place to call.”

“Okay.”

He exchanges numbers with Tommy’s mom, which feels weird but really isn’t, then steps back and lets them leave.

He keeps his smile pinned firmly in place as Mrs. Innit and Tommy get into the car. He watches as they buckle up, waves to Tommy when he looks to him, and waits as they round the U turn exit and leave campus. Only once their car turns, disappearing into Main Street traffic, does Techno turn back to his dorm.

He makes it to his room without feeling much different. In fact, he almost feels normal. He takes the elevator out of habit—because Wil never takes the stairs—and arrives with a ding on the second floor. He passes one of his neighbors in the hall, and they exchange polite greetings like normal. If he looks at all off, they don’t mention it. He walks into his room, drops himself into his desk chair, pulls up Word on his laptop, and—

And he can’t write a paper now, because all he can see is Wilbur laying in his lap in the car. All he can hear is Wilbur crying on the bench outside, saying “Techno, I’m going to die.” All he can think about is how he should have seen this sooner. Way sooner. How many signs had he missed? He was supposed to be a poet. He was supposed to be able to nit-pick out all the little details in life.

How had he missed such a glaring one?

Right as his eyes mist over, blurring the computer screen until it’s a swirling marble of blue and white, his phone dings on the desk. He furiously blinks the anxious tears away, and looks down to read it.

PHIL: Nothing for now. His mom’s here. I’m not going to text again unless it’s necessary, but I just wanted to make sure you’re OK?

TECHNO: I’m fine. Just gonna get some work done, I guess.

PHIL: Email your professors if you have stuff due tomorrow, they’ll understand.

Techno clicks his phone off, and looks again to the blank space in his Word document. It’s just a conclusion. Surely, he can write that. He doesn’t need an extension, he needs a distraction.

PHIL: He’ll be fine. He’s a tough kid.

Techno sets his phone face down on the desk, and scoots his chair closer, taking a deep breath. This is his element. If there's anything that will distract him, it's English. And Phil's right. Wil will be fine. He can't *not* be. He was fine just this afternoon.

Techno cracks his knuckles, releases a tense breath, and starts typing.

---

Tommy wakes up at God-Fucking-Shit A.M. to his phone ringing.

"*Fuuccckk*," he groans, rolling over and slapping around the mattress for the screen. "Shut the *fuck*. Up. Man. It's..."

His palm finally hits glass, and he blinks the sleep out of his eyes to squint at the screen. It's three in the fucking morning. Three a.m., and someone is calling him. *Phil* is calling him.

It takes his brain a minute to catch up with what his eyes are seeing, to remember exactly why he even has Phil's number saved. When he remembers the drive, when he remembers Phil telling him "Don't look, Tommy," and their arrival at the emergency room, when he remembers Phil saying he'd call if anything changed, Tommy's head spins and he suddenly has the very pronounced urge to vomit.

He doesn't. Instead, he clicks the 'answer call' button.

"Tommy?"

His mouth is too dry to speak. He hums, hoping it's answer enough.

"Tommy, I'm so sorry."

It's like the floor drops out from underneath him. Like the universe rips the roof off his house, and sucks out everything inside. It's like the split second just before he fell off the monkey bars when he was eight—he feels his hand wobble, sees the ground, and knows without really thinking about it that it's going to hurt.

"What?" he manages to strangle out, sitting up in bed and throwing his legs off the side. His heart is pounding like he needs to run, like he's going to fall, like he's already falling.

"Wilbur passed," Phil says quietly. "It was so fast, I couldn't even call you. Tommy, I'm so \_\_\_"

Tommy hangs up.

The silence rings out, heavy and irrepressibly *loud*. It's like one of those contradictory phrases Techno's rambled about before: an oxymoron. Tommy remembers the term purely because he thought the name was hilarious.

*“An ox moron,”* he’d laughed, spewing the sandwich he’d been eating all over their cafeteria table. *“A moronic ox.”*

Loud silence is an oxymoron. It seems like it can’t be possible, but Tommy sits in it and swears this silence is louder than any words anyone will ever say.

PHIL: Tommy

PHIL: Go to your parents if you haven’t already

PHIL: I called Techno already. I’m sure you can call him if you need someone. Or your other friends.

PHIL: I care about you too, okay? Don’t be afraid to reach out.

Go to your parents. Call Techno. Reach out.

Tommy can’t think. Tommy can’t breathe.

He stumbles out of bed. The air catches in his chest and then squeezes, making him dizzy, and he grabs onto his desk chair for support. It’s dark. He can barely see anything in the pitch black bedroom. He can feel his way to the door, though, feel his way down the hall, past his parents room, and down the stairs.

Wilbur’s dead. Wilbur’s dead. Wilbur *can’t* be dead. No. He was fine! Less than twelve hours ago, he was fine! He drove Tommy to a comedy show. He laughed with him and Techno about their stupid YouTube ideas. He cracked jokes and smiled and *he was fine!*

*Phil must have been lying*, Tommy thinks as he jams muddy red Converse onto his feet. *Phil was lying to me. Wilbur’s not dead. He isn’t.*

He doesn’t bother tying the shoelaces. He slips out the front door silently, like he’s done dozens of times before (he’s a teenager, sue him for sneaking out every once in a while), and starts walking down the street.

Wilbur is not dead, and he’s going to prove it. He’s going to walk to Essempi University—it’s not far, only a couple miles from his house—and get Wilbur to let him into his dorm. He knows which one it is. He’s good at picking locks, too. Even if Wilbur doesn’t answer, he can pick his way in. He can probably bypass the card swipe, too, if he tries. He got into the cafeteria without an ID all those times. How different can it be?

Halfway there, it starts drizzling. Halfway there, it starts pouring. Halfway there, Tommy starts crying.

Cars whizz by on the street, but he keeps his head down and ignores them all. Tears mix with rain and then snot on his face as he turns away from campus, changing his trajectory and heading for the park instead. Gate Park. The same place he, Wilbur, and Techno had gone only a few days ago.

Thunder ripples overhead, and he walks faster, shoes slapping against puddles already accumulating. He thinks he's heading for cover, for a roof over his head, but he stops on the bridge instead of under an awning at the park. He can't bring himself to move any further.

Sniffing, he rests his arms on the railing and peers down at the river below. It's dark and murky, brown water swirling rapidly with the rain pouring down. Tommy's already soaked. He can feel the cold droplets sinking into his pajama shirt, making his feet squish inside his sneakers.

There's a pile of rocks left on the ledge, probably by some little kid making towers. Tommy picks the top one off, aims at the river's swirling darkness, and chucks it as hard as he can.

It's not much of a release. It doesn't do much to stop the tightening in his lungs, and the angry tears building behind his eyes, but it's something.

He picks up the next rock and keeps going.

*How dare Phil lie to him.*

Throw.

*How dare he tell him that Wilbur's dead when he... he can't be. He isn't.*

Throw.

*He's... he is. He is, because why would Phil lie to him? What would be the point? Only a sick bastard would lie about something like that, and Phil is not... Phil isn't...*

Throw.

*But if Wilbur's dead, if Wilbur's gone. Where the hell does that leave him? How did this even happen?*

He drops the next rock on accident, and it goes plopping into the waves.

*How did he never notice? Why didn't they do something? Why didn't Wilbur do something?*

Throw.

*Wilbur knew the whole time, and did nothing? Said nothing?*

Throw.

*Why did he let them all get close if he knew he was a time bomb, just waiting to explode? Why— Why did he do that? Why did he—?*

The last stone goes zinging off the side of the bridge, and Tommy crumples to the wooden floor. He presses his forehead to the rails in front of him and sobs, loud and harsh, explosive like the thunder still rumbling overhead. Explosive like a bomb. Wilbur's bomb.

“You fucking idiot,” he manages between gasping, borderline-hyperventilating heaves. “You can’t— do this— to me. Prick. Fuck you. You can’t just— fuckin’— leave me! You can’t just— leave! You can’t!”

He’s soaked. Water pools around his legs where he kneels, and drips from the bangs hanging in front of his eyes.

Thunder rumbles above him again. He should move. He should find shelter somewhere. Get warm, get dry. He can’t, though. His limbs have become one with the bridge, and he can’t remember how to move them. Can’t find the energy to do anything but sit there and be angry.

So he sits. And he cries. And he’s angry. And the sky is angry with him.

---

Techno’s phone rings for the second time within an hour, and he almost doesn’t answer it.

He’d been asleep when Phil called. Hunched over his computer, the ‘F’ key had created a pretty sizable dent in his character count as he slept with his cheek pressed on top of it. Nearly thirty pages had been covered.

Oops. It didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter, because the first words out of Phil’s mouth when Techno answered the phone were, “Techno, Wilbur... he’s... Gods I am *so sorry*.”

Everything after that was a little numb. A little fuzzy.

He still felt numb and fuzzy the second time his phone rang. He was laying on the floor, staring up at the ceiling and trying to will himself to do anything. Anything at all. He should meet Phil at the hospital (Why? What’s the point if Wilbur was already—?). He should talk to someone, process this, maybe even call his parents (But he doesn’t really feel sad. Just... he doesn’t know. For the first time in his English career, no good word pops into his head to describe it. It tingles, a bit). He should get up and backspace those thirty pages of ‘F’s (Wilbur would find them hysterical, and beg him to leave it).

So when the phone rings the second time, he almost doesn’t bother moving to answer. But it keeps ringing. And ringing. And at this point it’s getting annoying, so Techno begrudgingly rolls over and finds his phone laying beside him.

TOMMY’S MOM shows up on the screen, and Techno’s brow furrows in confusion.

He clicks accept.

“Hello?”

“Techno, oh thank god. Are you doing alright, honey? Your voice sounds scratchy.”

If tingly is considered doing alright, then yes. He doesn't feel like he thinks he should feel. Can he put it that way?

*Hi, my best friend just died, but I haven't cried about it. I don't know if I ever will. There might be something wrong with me.*

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. Uh... did you need something?"

"I was just wondering if you'd seen Tommy?"

Tommy. Techno's mind takes a brief break from the tingly numbness to panic. He hadn't heard from Tommy, but Phil must have called him. There was no way he hadn't been told yet.

He puts Mrs. Innit on speaker and swipes away from the call to check his messages. Sure enough, there's nothing new from Tommy.

"He's not with you? He went home last night."

"Yeah, he did. But we heard a door close downstairs and he's not here. I think he left to go see you, but it's raining like hell out there and he left his phone..."

"I haven't seen him. He's not here."

Techno's already tossing on shoes and a jacket as he speaks. He tears through his closet to find his umbrella, then grabs the keys off his desk.

"Shit. I don't know where he's gone. I'm going to take the car to look for him."

"He probably took shelter somewhere along the way," Techno reasons, trying to think logically through the sludge in his brain. First Wilbur, now Tommy. His friends are going to give him a heart attack at age twenty. "I'll help you look."

"Thank you."

He doesn't let her say any more before he hangs up. He doesn't know if she *knows*, and if she doesn't *know*, he doesn't want her to ask. He really doesn't want to answer the inevitable question. He doesn't even know if he could.

He shoves that to the back of his mind and heads out the door.

The world outside the dorms is dark, wet, and slushy. Techno's boots slosh through puddles as he walks to Main Street, and then down the sidewalk alongside it, back in the direction of Tommy's house. If Tommy truly was coming to his dorm, he must have taken shelter somewhere along this route.

Wind batters his umbrella, trying to tear it from his hands as he trundles along. It almost succeeds, once, and Techno has to forcefully yank the umbrella's rib cage back into place.

He checks everywhere he thinks Tommy might be: the massive awning outside the theater and music building, the bus stop benches, the patio outside the student center and the smaller



awnings of the nearby shops.

Nothing. There is no sign of the blond high schooler anywhere.

Techno's about to turn around and double back when something catches his eye across the street.

Gate Park's entrance, the wooden sign and shrouded trees, looks like a gaping mouth. The inside is so dark he can't see anything but pitch black void, but something in him twists at the familiar location.

Last time he was there, they'd all been there together. He'd told Wil about it later on, at the STEM center. Told him how sitting on top of the lookout had pulled the haze back from his eyes, if only for a little bit.

Techno presses the crosswalk button and heads across the street.

The park is dark and smells like pine when he enters. There are a couple lamps around the edges, but they're all old, and really don't do much to light the way. It's sort of eerie, something Techno would expect to see in a horror movie. The familiarity is a relief, though. And so is the sight of a red t-shirt hunched over in the middle of the bridge.

"Tommy," Techno breathes.

He trudges through mud to get to the bridge, not caring that his sneakers sink deep enough to get his socks wet. Tommy is sitting on the bridge, back pressed to the rails and head buried in his arms. He might be sleeping. Techno isn't sure.

Either way, Techno walks until he stands over him with the umbrella, then repeats.

"Tommy?"

Tommy's head raises from his knees. He looks up at Techno, and Techno only has a second to take in the red-rimmed eyes, snotty nose, and puffy face of a *child* before Tommy's face screws up. Not in sadness, like Techno was expecting. In anger.

"What are you doing here?"

Techno frowns at the accusatory tone. "I could ask you the same thing. You know your mom's looking for you?"

"I don't care."

Techno sighs. He sinks down to a crouch, getting on Tommy's level. "You should. She's worried about you."

Tommy snuffles and stubbornly does not respond. He keeps his gaze to the left, away from Techno.

"What's wrong?" Techno asks.

“What’s wrong?” Tommy scoffs, and suddenly blue eyes are back on Techno again. They’re not the same, though. All the brightness has seeped out of them, making them look gray and dull even as Tommy glares at him. “What’s wrong? Wilbur’s *dead*.”

The words are like a sucker punch to the stomach. Even though he already knew the truth, Techno sucks in a breath.

“Tommy—”

“No, no. He’s dead, Techno, and I didn’t— We didn’t— He didn’t do anything about it. He didn’t even tell us he was sick.”

Tommy’s voice hitches on the last word, cracking like static, and Techno’s heart squeezes.

“Tommy, I know he didn’t tell us, but—”

“He didn’t even try to save himself! I looked it up, Techno! I got home last night, and I looked up CKD on my computer! He could have been getting treatment, but he didn’t. He could have been getting better, but he— he didn’t!”

“It was too late, Tommy. Phil told me there were too many toxins already built up. They couldn’t get rid of them fast enough. It’s like a poison, and they’d already destroyed... they’d already...”

“Fuck you!” Tommy suddenly shouts. It takes Techno by surprise, and he steps back and to his feet as Tommy wobbles to his. “It wasn’t too late! It wouldn’t have been too late if he’d just gone to treatment! Or if we’d noticed sooner, and made him go. We should have made him go! How did you not realize?”

“Me?”

“Yes! You’re the adult! You saw him more often!”

“Tommy,” Techno’s voice drops dangerously low, “don’t start playin’ the blame game. You know that’s not fair.”

“You did see him,” Tommy stubbornly huffs. His face pinches, and for a second Techno thinks the kid’s about to break down. But a second later the storm clears, and he whispers instead. “He didn’t even tell us.”

Tommy’s obviously pissed, so Techno decides the best course of action is to text his mom their location and wait for her to pick him up. He tells Tommy she’s on her way, but Tommy stubbornly refuses to respond to him, so they wind up waiting on one of the park benches in silence. Techno keeps his umbrella up, trying to shield both of them from the rain. It doesn’t work. Tommy keeps scooting out from under it, and so eventually he gives up and only covers himself.

Mrs. Innit arrives after five long, tense, and silent minutes have gone by. She shoots Techno a confused look when she sees them sitting so far apart, but when Tommy bounds over to her

she pulls her attention away to start fussing over his soaking wet clothes and squishing sneakers. She herds him into the car, and offers Techno a ride back to his dorm.

“Please, it’s raining cats and dogs out here. This is the least I can do,” she says through the passenger-side window.

Techno thinks about it. He really does. But Tommy is still refusing to look at him from the backseat, and he has a feeling that he and his mom need to talk alone anyway. He’s gleaned that Mrs. Innit doesn’t know about the phone call and that Wilbur is—

He shakes his head, and Mrs. Innit frowns.

“Well, stay safe, okay? I’m glad you at least remembered to bring an umbrella.”

Techno nods his thanks, and once the car pulls away he sets off in the direction of his dorm.

Halfway there, he feels something warm drip down his face.

*Oh*, he thinks as the warm thing hits his mouth, and he tastes salt, *well, at least I’m finally crying*.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm just gonna... ok

//

comments and kudos are always appreciated!

you can also find me on [twitter](#) and [tumblr](#)!! I talk a lot more about my fics and writing/dsmp stuff there.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

Techno swings the door to his dorm open, and is met with one very wet, very cold looking Tommy Innit. He shivers in the hallway as Techno stares, bewildered, at him.

“Tommy? What are you doin’ here? Why are you all wet?”

“... ‘S raining, innit?” Tommy chatters.

“How did you get inside?”

“Used s-someone else’s key. Followed them in. N-not hard. Everyone in this dorm lets people t-tailgate.”

Another second passes as they stare at each other. Then Tommy glances down at the mini lake he’s creating in the hallway, and winces.

“Can I c-come inside?”

## Chapter Notes

cw: grief

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

April showers bring May flowers, and April showers... a lot. Techno sits on the carpeted floor of his dorm room as rain patters against his window, and debates going to class.

It’s Wednesday. Three days since the hospital. Three days since the call from Phil, and the hunt in the rain for Tommy, and... yeah. It’s been three days.

Phil told him he doesn’t need to go to classes, that his professors will understand, and not to push himself too early, but quite frankly Techno *wants* to go to class. He needs an out. He needs a better distraction than playing *Candy Crush* on his phone for the sixtieth time that day, or bouncing a tennis ball off his ceiling until his upstairs neighbors stomp back, or whatever the hell he’s been doing knocking his feet back and forth against each other on the floor. If he doesn’t do something that isn’t numbly staring at a wall soon, he’s going to go insane.

Maybe he already has.

He keeps trying to text Wilbur. The first time he caught himself doing it, he nearly puked. He dropped his phone on his bed and sat up, clutching his shirt as his stomach roiled. The second time, he wearily sighed and powered the phone all the way off.

There's something to be said about technology and how it gives you an immortal, ever-present link to those that have gone.

Techno doesn't think he likes it.

Sighing, he gets to his feet and grabs his backpack.

It's not like he hasn't been keeping up with homework. In fact, he's probably been doing better managing his time now than he has this whole semester, purely because—without classes (without Wil)—he has so much of it. There is *so much* free time, and Techno doesn't want to spend a second of it thinking about what he could have been doing if—

So he throws himself into his work. He wrote his final paper in a day, and proof-read it this morning. He finished reading his last book for Classical Lit, and contributed seven paragraphs to the online discussion board for it. He finished his bio textbook at two a.m. last night, and made flash cards for his final exam next week. He finished editing his last Videography video.

If he was going to do all that, he might as well just go to class.

He has Videography first on Wednesdays, so he stuffs his laptop into his bag and heads outside.

It's drizzling. Not enough to really warrant an umbrella, but he pops his open anyway. He's got his laptop in his bag, and if that gets wet, it's over for him. He trudges down wet and slippery sidewalk, skirting puddles that would sink up to his ankles, and crossing the street once he gets close enough to see the film building's wooden sign. He marches up the concrete steps, squeaks his way through the hallways, and finally arrives outside his lecture hall.

He stands there. And stands there.

And stands there.

Through the door's tiny window, he can see his professor inside, clutching the clipboard roll-sheet and calling out names. He's probably passed Techno's name already, since his last name is so early in the alphabetical order, but he'd count him present if he saw him walk in.

"Kathy Smith?"

"Here."

"Wilbur Soot?"

The silence that follows feels like an anvil dropped perfectly over Techno's head. Even though he's numb, even though he's been living every day in that gray haze, where he doesn't have to recognize Wilbur is... That silent moment is like a knife, stabbing the fog and forcing its way through.

He shouldn't have come. He shouldn't have left his dorm. This is too much, and Phil was right, it's too early.

His heart pounds in his chest, and he steps back from the door only to smack right into someone standing behind him.

Techno whirls around, and there, standing in front of him, is Tommy.

"Tommy?" he exhales.

Tommy shifts. He doesn't look much better than he did that day in the rain. His eyes are still dull, and there are deep gray bags accompanying them now. But at least he's not soaking wet this time.

"Move," Tommy says, plainly, and Techno does. He scoots aside, giving Tommy full access to the doorway.

Just as the kid's about to brush past him into the room, Techno grabs his arm.

"Wait. Are you sure you... I mean... do you really want to be here right now?"

Tommy shoots a look back at him, one that would be spitfire if the blue in his eyes wasn't so distorted. "*You're* here right now," he points out, and there's a bitter edge to his voice that sets Techno on edge.

He decides not to point out that he was about to turn tail and run before he bumped into Tommy. Instead, he sighs and lets go of Tommy's arm.

"Yeah."

Tommy slips inside, and Techno follows.

His usual spot is near the front, but Techno bypasses it because he doesn't want to sit with the empty seat on his left. He chooses a new seat further back, and sinks into the padded chair with a shaky breath.

Tommy sits in his usual spot on the right side of the room, and Techno watches from his new vantage-point as he unloads his backpack and gets ready for class. Besides looking like he might physically collapse from exhaustion at any moment, he actually looks... quite determined to be here. There's a little flicker of light in his eyes that Techno hasn't seen since Sunday. Of course, then his gaze catches on Techno's, and the light smothers out.

Techno looks away.

Ever since Sunday and their mini argument in the park, Tommy hasn't spoken to him. Techno spoke to Phil about it yesterday through text, but all Phil said was that some people express their grief through anger, and that Techno might just have to wait until that anger ends.

"It's not your fault," Phil's little bubbles of text had read. "Anger is just how some people choose to cope. Especially when their grief is really hard to process on its own. Kristin could

talk to you more about it, if you want, but otherwise I think you'll just have to wait it out. It's not your fault, though. None of this is your fault."

Sometimes, it's hard not to feel like it is. Spoken out of grief or not, Tommy's words in the park had some realism to them.

Wasn't it his fault for not realizing sooner? Thinking back, he'd been given so many signs, but he hadn't taken any of them.

The way Wilbur would sit down sometimes on their way to classes, claiming he just needed a breather because of his anemia, but that it wasn't anything to worry about. Techno should have worried. He should have questioned it more.

The way he picked at food in the cafeteria. He'd steadily been eating less and less, but Techno hadn't mentioned it, figuring he was just stressed over the approaching finals. He should have said something. He shouldn't have assumed.

The fountain when he'd gotten sick. The day he'd left Tommy's in a rush.

*Holy crap*, Techno thinks as he remembers the way Wilbur's hands had tightened around the steering wheel when he dropped him off. Had he been on his way to an appointment? Had that been one of those days when he hadn't skipped treatment? Had that been the day he found out that there wasn't much they could do, and started skipping again? Had he been about to tell Techno what was going on? Techno should have listened. He should have asked.

Then there were the elevators. The goddamn elevators because Wilbur had been too tired to take the stairs.

Why hadn't he realized? Why hadn't Wil told him?

Techno is going to start crying if he keeps thinking about this, so he stops. He forcefully tunes out his own thoughts, and redirects his attention to the classroom. He'd momentarily forgotten he was even inside one.

When he looks down, Tommy is staring at him. Their eyes connect, and for the briefest moment, Techno's met with a look of understanding. Of sympathy.

Then Tommy tears his gaze away, and class begins.

---

"Hey, is this Techno Blade?"

Techno dodges a particularly deep puddle on the sidewalk, and struggles not to drop his phone. Class let out not even ten minutes ago, and he'd been on his way back to the dorm when an unknown number popped up on his phone screen. He's gotten into the habit, over the past few days, of answering every single call that comes in. So it'd been second nature to

press accept and pull it up to his ear. Unfortunately, he's also carting his backpack, umbrella, and his last quiz—graded and returned—from Videography. It's a struggle to carry all three items and talk on the phone. Especially as rain pelts down overhead.

"Hello? Yes, who's this?"

"This is Wilbur's mom."

Techno's quiz nearly goes fluttering into the next puddle. He scrambles to catch it and respond at the same time.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, sorry, um... How are you doing?"

How is *he* doing? He feels like he should be asking her that question, but a lump forms in his throat, so instead of returning the sympathy, he says, "I'm okay."

"Phil gave me your number at the hospital, I hope you don't mind. I just..." For the first time in the call, her voice wavers. Techno grits his teeth, walking back to his dorm even faster. "We're having a funeral on Friday. I was hoping you and Tommy could both come."

"O-oh."

"Of course, I understand if you don't want to," Ms. Soot rushes on. "It's been... hard. And I know you were really close, I just—I've heard so much about you guys. He would have wanted you there, so it would mean a lot to... to both of us if you came."

Techno thinks there's a switch in his head, because he can flip it and suddenly all he feels is TV static. Or packing peanuts. It's like his brain gets stuffed with them, and for just a little while—while the switch is flipped—he doesn't feel the pain. He thinks he flipped it in the park, when he explained to Tommy how there was nothing anyone could have done. It was his logical side. It was the side that didn't have to hurt.

"Yeah. Of course I'll come," he says, feeling the buzz of static in his fingers.

A relieved exhale comes from the other end of the speaker. "Okay, thank you. Actually, thank you so much. I— Wil cared about you so much. He talked about you guys all the time."

Techno swallows. "He did?"

"*All* the time. Whenever he visited home, or called, or texted. All of it." Ms. Soot laughs tearily, and Techno hurries up the steps to his dorm. The static can only hold for so long. Eventually, he's going to break. He can feel it pressing in, the knowledge of "funeral" and "cared about you" and what Tommy had said to him in the park about how this was his fault.

He sees the elevators, and purposefully chooses the stairs.

"You two meant the world to him. And, Techno, if you have any questions, anything you want to know, I know this has got to be hard for you. It's been hard for me too. If I can help



you out at all...”

Techno reaches his dorm, and unlocks it faster than he ever has before. The door slams shut behind him as he enters and crosses the floor to his desk, where he leans up against the chair and tries to just breathe. He has questions. He has so many questions. So many that they almost overwhelm the static, almost disrupt the faux-calm he’s blanketed over himself.

Almost.

“Did it hurt?” he asks first, because even though his head is crowded with “whys” and “hows” and “whats,” he cares more about his friend in this moment than anything else.

“Oh, no, sweetie. It didn’t. Just like going to sleep.”

Techno nods his head shakily, and feels the first knot out of thousands unravel from around his chest.

“Good.”

---

Techno does his laundry for the second time in three days. He doesn’t have much, but he decides to strip his sheets and do those too. Just for the heck of it. And because, if he keeps tossing his tennis ball against the ceiling, he thinks he’s going to start receiving death threats from his upstairs neighbor.

By the time he finishes washing and is re-flattening his stupid, dumb, annoying, irritation-to-society fitted sheet over his ever so slightly too small dorm mattress, it’s midnight, and most of the dorm hall outside has quieted. He works in relative silence, the only sound coming from his phone, which is very faintly playing one of his old playlists in the corner of the room. Billy Joel, Queen, the Beatles—it’s all the stuff Wilbur liked, but that Techno had sworn he liked first.

“*Look. I made this playlist in... 2015,*” he’d said, leaning over on the STEM balcony to shove his phone in Wilbur’s face.

Wilbur snorted and pushed him away. “*Who gave you access to a Spotify account at fifteen years old? I bet you had so many cringe playlists. I listened to their music the old fashioned way—CDs.*”

“*Of course you owned CDs. Did you save any as relics?*”

“*I did, actually.*”

“*Yooo. You could donate them to a museum.*”

*“Shut up, you’re such a Gen Z conformist– Stop falling for their all-digital plans, the government’s going to use that to track– HAHA STOP THAT’S MY PHONE!”*

*Knock, knock, knock.*

Techno jumped. The corner of the sheet flew out of his hand, snapping back toward the center of the bed and taking the other corner with it, and he groaned. Whoever designed fitted sheets was simultaneously a genius and the world’s most despicable human being. Once he looked up their name, he was going to curse them to high heaven every time—

Techno swings the door to his dorm open, and is met with one very wet, very cold looking Tommy Innit. He shivers in the hallway as Techno stares, bewildered, at him.

“Tommy? What are you doin’ here? Why are you all wet?”

“... ‘S raining, innit?” Tommy chatters.

“How did you get inside?”

“Used s-someone else’s key. Followed them in. N-not hard. Everyone in this dorm lets people t-tailgate.”

Another second passes as they stare at each other. Then Tommy glances down at the mini lake he’s creating in the hallway, and winces.

“Can I c-come inside?”

“Oh.” Techno stumbles back, hurriedly swinging the door open further. “Yeah, come in. You’re drippin’ everywhere. I’ll get you a towel.”

Tommy catches the door so it doesn’t slam, while Techno grabs him a towel from the closet. He tosses a baby pink one—the only color of towels he owns—across the room, and watches as Tommy wraps it around his shoulders. Bees Gees’ *Stayin’ Alive* is still playing in the corner, so he turns it off.

“Did you walk here?”

Tommy nods. He stands awkwardly in the middle of Techno’s dorm, towel wrapped tight around him but clothes and hair still dripping.

“By yourself? In the rain?”

“Who else would have come with me?”

“I don’t know. Tubbo? Ranboo? Any of your high school friends?”

Tommy shakes his head, and water droplets fling onto the empty bed across from Techno’s. He’d never had it removed at the beginning of the semester, and had been using the extra mattress as a couch. Perks of living alone.

“No. They’re all asleep by now.”

“High schoolers sleep?” Techno chuckles, aiming for a joke. Even he can hear the strain in his tone, though. He hasn’t joked since... “I doubt that. Does your mom know you’re here?”

“No.”

“Tommy.”

Tommy shrugs like a disobedient child, and Techno unlocks his phone.

“She was asleep.”

“That’s a bad excuse.”

“... Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’ll text her you’re here so she doesn’t worry like Sunday.”

At the mention of Sunday, the whole room falls silent. Techno uses the silence to text out a quick message to Mrs. Innit, whose number he’d saved to his phone after Tommy’s last escapade, then tosses the phone to his bed. When he looks back up, Tommy is sniffing.

“Techno, I’m sorry,” he chokes out, rubbing at his nose. “I didn’t mean it, what I said at the park. I was just angry. I don’t even know why I said it, I just— I don’t know what to do now. I feel fuckin’ awful, like someone took one of those giant ice-cream scoops and— and dug out part of my chest, and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to not be angry.”

Techno’s shoulders sank. He’d never been good with Tommy’s emotions. Whether it was tears over math or tears of laughter in the campus fountain, Tommy had always been explosive where Techno was silent. It wasn’t like Techno didn’t understand Tommy’s emotions, or didn’t appreciate them, he was just used to internalizing big feelings until the last second possible, and Tommy wasn’t like that. When Tommy felt something big, he didn’t hesitate to show it immediately. He was a firework where Techno was a balloon steadily leaking. Or maybe it was the opposite. Tommy’s release started early, and Techno exploded late.

Either way, it’d always been Wilbur who’d dealt with it. Always Wilbur staying calm and level headed, picking big emotions up and making them feel smaller. Acting as the middle; bridging the space between them.

Now that Wilbur wasn’t here, they were both falling apart. They hadn’t talked in three days.

Techno fidgeted in place. What would Wilbur do? How would he deal with this? How would he pick them up and glue them back together?

Slowly, he steps closer and wraps his arms around Tommy’s shoulders.

“I’m all wet,” Tommy argues, but it’s feeble because he doesn’t pull away. He shuffles closer instead, leeching off of Techno’s warmth.

When his shoulders start shaking, Techno doesn't mention it.

"Wilbur's mom texted me," Tommy says eventually, snuffles punctuating his breaths. "Says there's a funeral on Friday."

"I know. She told me too."

"Techno, I don't know what to wear to a funeral."

For some reason, that strikes Techno as the funniest thing Tommy possibly could have said in that moment. He laughs, and feels Tommy go still underneath him before hesitantly laughing back.

"Don't you have a suit?" Techno asks.

Tommy shakes his head against Techno's chest. "'S too small."

"Eh. Suits are overrated anyway."

Tommy giggles again, and Techno finally relaxes into the hug. He's got this. This is his little brother, and he's got him.

For a little while, they stay there in the middle of Techno's room, wrapped up in each other's arms. Then water starts bleeding through Techno's pajamas, and puddling around his feet on the floor, and he carefully untangles himself to get Tommy some substitute clothes.

His mom had gifted him a pair of fluffy, red pajama pants for the winter, so he grabs those along with a university t-shirt and chucks them at Tommy's chest.

"Change," he directs. Then, while Tommy wanders off to the community bathroom down the hall, he finally manages to shove his fitted sheet back over his mattress.

When Tommy comes back, he hands Techno the wet towel and sits down on the empty bed.

"Sorry," he says, wiping at his eyes and cracking a watery smile. "I didn't really care about grabbing an umbrella when I left."

"I don't mind," Techno says truthfully. He drops the towel to the carpet and starts mopping up the wet spot. "If it ever molds, it won't be until I'm long gone from this room."

"Moving dorms?" Tommy says, a corner of his mouth wavering downward.

"Moving rooms. The next person can pay for renovations."

"That's fucked up, Techno Blade."

Techno smiles, genuinely this time, and Tommy smiles back.

"I missed you," the blond quietly admits.

"I missed you too. Are you gonna stay here tonight?"

“Can I?” Tommy looks up hopefully, and Techno nods.

“Course. I’m not gonna force you back out in the rain.”

“I mean, I did yell at you before.”

Techno sits down beside Tommy on the bed. “Maybe some of it was true.”

Tommy shakes his head instantly. “No. No I was just angry, Techno. Nothing I said was true.”

“Well, we didn’t notice, did we? *I* didn’t notice. Shouldn’t I have? You were right. I did see him all the time.”

“Techno, it’s not your fault. It’s not any of our faults.”

Techno keeps his mouth shut and looks down at his lap. The static is fizzling in his head again, tempting him to just flip the switch and turn it all off.

Carefully, he balances the switch between on and off, and turns to Tommy.

“Want to make a fort?”

They make a fort. They push Techno’s two mattresses together on the floor, and shove his sheet into the twin beds’ wire sides to suspend it over the top. He only has two pillows, but they put one on each bed and follow them up with his comforter and an extra, woolen blanket.

Techno has a flashlight in his closet for power emergencies, so he grabs that and lets Tommy click it on inside the little tent. Then he shuts the main lights off, and crawls in.

“I feel like I’m fuckin’ five-years-old again,” Tommy laughs lightly, laying down to shine the flashlight at the gray sheet above them.

Techno lays down on the bed beside him. “What? You haven’t made a fort since you were five?”

Tommy shrugs. “Not really. I made one with Ranboo and Tubbo, once. It was huge, took up my whole room. My mom was so pissed when she found it, though.” He laughs—loud and bright, like before—and Techno can’t help but smile as he rambles on. “We’d stolen all the pillows from downstairs—and I mean *all* of them, even the couch cushions—and used them to build this massive fort around my bed. It was huge! We stole my parents sheets, too, which I think is what she was most mad about. But it was fine, because the end result was sick. Coolest fort I’ve ever made.”

“You mean this one isn’t cool?” Techno asks, mock offense.

“Mmm... I’d rate it a D on the tier list. Maybe a C, for the flashlight.”

Techno laughs, and Tommy clicks the flashlight on and off, on and off.

When they finally stop messing around, Tommy yawns and rolls to face him.

“I miss Wilbur,” he whispers, clicking the flashlight off.

“I miss him too.”

“A lot.”

“I know.”

Tommy pulls Techno’s comforter up to his chin, and tucks his nose inside it.

“I can’t stop crying,” he admits, voice breaking.

Techno scoots closer, tears pricking at his eyes as Tommy starts to shake again. “Wanna know a secret?”

“W-what?”

“Sometimes I can’t even start.”

“Heh... I’d rather that.”

Techno laughs, and a single tear escapes down his cheek and onto the mattress as he puts his arms around Tommy and pulls him to his chest. Tommy tucks himself in, curling his knees up and knocking his head into Techno’s shoulder.

Like it’s being pushed out, the static slips back from Techno’s mind. Replacing it is a quiet, fond warmth, and a weight he’d been avoiding. It crashes into him like warm ocean water, sinking into his chest and finally dissolving the dam that’d been pushing all his feelings down.

“I *really* miss him,” Tommy sniffles as Techno reaches up to scrub at his own face.

“I do too.”

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

Techno presses his face into Tommy’s hair, glad it’s already wet. “I know. Me neither.”

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry I didn’t try harder to be there for you, after. You were obviously hurting.”

“So were you.”

“Yeah.”

It’s the first time he admits it. It’s also the first time it really sinks in. Wilbur is dead. Wilbur is not coming back.

Techno clutches Tommy a little tighter.

There are so many things they didn't do, didn't say. Techno never got to see Wilbur play guitar in front of a crowd. He never got to visit his house, or invite Wil to visit his. They didn't get a summer, or a fall, or even a finals week together. He never got to tell Wilbur exactly how much his friendship meant to him. Never got to explain how horribly lonely he'd been before he met him. He never even got to ask him what he thought about *Catcher in the Rye*. It'd been left unfinished, like so many other things.

He never even got to say goodbye.

In the end, Techno's pen had barely gleaned Wilbur's paper. He'd only known him for one semester. Three months. And yet.

He'd watched him play guitar, just for him, on the STEM center balcony. He'd gone on spring break with him and Tommy, and stayed up until three a.m. playing board games and watching shitty movies. They'd fought in a water fountain, and thrown pebbles at a park. He'd listened to Wilbur give a shitty campus tour and create a star-crossed love story for two football players. They'd slept over at Tommy's house (accidentally, but still). They'd driven down highways with music blasting, and even when there was silence it'd always been comfortable.

*"You can't just enjoy the journey?"* Wilbur had asked, once, on the way to Niki's Ice-Cream.

Techno had enjoyed the journey. Even if it was cut short.

*"Wilbur had his reasons for not telling you,"* Ms. Soot had said, voice quiet as Techno sat on the floor of his dorm and patiently listened. *"He didn't like talking about it, or making it a big deal. He just wanted to be treated normally. He'd mentioned to me... before... that he didn't want to waste money on treatments when it'd be better used for an eventual surgery, and I knew he didn't want to live his life in a hospital room. If Wilbur was going to live, he was going to capital L Live, you know?"*

Techno had swallowed hard from his place on the floor. *"Yeah, I know,"* he said, thinking of starry nights and a strumming guitar.

In the end, he finally starts to understand what Wilbur meant that night on the balcony, when he'd been talking about Keats' poem. The fact that life is so ephemeral makes everything mean more, not less. Techno had already accomplished so much just by existing. Just by being here and having experiences with the people he cared about.

Sure, he wishes Wilbur stayed longer. He doesn't think he'll ever stop wishing he stayed longer. But, as he holds Tommy tight and finally lets the pent up grief flood out, he thinks about all the things they *did* do, and decides that they at least did an exceptionally good job existing together.

this update is coming incredibly late from me bc my family will not leave me alone.  
god, mom, can you not see I am editing minecraft fanfiction?? /j

thank you for reading!! comments and kudos are always appreciated <3

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# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

“I’m going to contradict myself again,” he warns, sniffing and wiping at his eyes, “but this is both the best birthday of my life, and worst birthday my life.”

“Antithesis,” Techno mumbles automatically.

“What?”

“Oh, uh, antithesis. It’s like... a literary device.”

## Chapter Notes

CWs: grief

this is a happier chapter i swear

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Tommy wakes up the next morning, there’s an elbow in his face, and someone is snoring.

“Techno,” Tommy huffs, reaching up to push away the intruding limb. “You’re on my side. G’t off.”

“Hm...” More snoring accompanies the hum.

“Bitch.”

Tommy attempts to roll over, only to find that another arm is caught around his torso. Fuck. He’s been hug-trapped.

“Techno, what the fuck. Stop being clingy and let me up,” Tommy says.

No response, save heavy snores, from the pink-haired boy.

Tommy huffs an annoyed breath, then sinks back to the mattress, accepting his fate. At least it’s warm here. Sunshine is only just starting to shine through the cracks in Techno’s blinds, and the sheet hanging above both their heads traps it in, keeps the heat from leaving.

Techno’s comforter is rumped over both of them, and somehow Tommy has lost his pillow to the ground, but that was fine, because apparently he’d stolen Techno’s.

He yawns, and slides his gaze over to Techno’s closed eyes. He looks peaceful, pink hair strewn over his face and snores coming in an even rhythm. If Tommy tries, he can pretend

this is just a normal sleepover, and they weren't both breaking down last night.

Grief, Tommy thinks, is sticky.

It's not like the monkey bars when he was eight. This time, he has no choice but to remember the pain of hitting the ground. He can remember with startling clarity the moment Phil said, over the phone, "Tommy, I'm so sorry." He can remember the tears that came after, and the sudden, piercing pain in his chest that prompted him to run, to leave.

With his broken arm, he can't remember the pain. But with this, he doesn't think he'll ever forget.

Techno shifts, and Tommy hurriedly blinks the materialized tears back from his eyes.

"Mm... G'mornin'," Techno grumbles as his eyes crack open.

"Morning, Blade."

Techno yawns, and stretches the arm that had been wrapped around Tommy up over his head. He blinks up at the fort ceiling for a minute, squinting like he can't quite understand why it's there, then rubs his eyes and says, "I forgot we made a fort."

Tommy snickers, and Techno rolls back over to sling his arm on top of him.

"Hey! Stop! I just got out of your sticky, sweaty arm jail, clingy bitch. Let go!"

Techno's laugh is deep and full of sleep, but it's warmer than most of the half-hearted laughter he'd been giving him recently, so Tommy takes it. He stretches an arm up to snag the pillow he'd tossed over the edge, then brings it down over Techno's head.

"Let! Me! Go!"

Techno's grip tightens, and Tommy laughs as he slams the pillow down over Techno's face again.

"Never. Sorry. You're stuck here," comes the muffled response.

"I'm telling Phil. Where's my phone... PHIIILL!"

Techno snorts from under Tommy's pillow, but finally does let him go. His arms release, and Tommy scrambles out of the fort.

He actually *doesn't* know where his phone is. Did he even bring it?

He pats the pockets of Techno's fuzzy pajama pants, but there's nothing. It's not on the floor either. Oh shit. Wait. Did he have it in his clothes? His soaking *wet* clothes? Shit, shit, shit, his mom's going to kill him.

"Where's my phone?" he asks, hoping Techno's memory is better than his.

Techno hums from inside the fort. “I dunno. Want me to call it?”

“Yes please.”

There’s muffled shuffling from inside the fort, then Techno says, “Okay. It’s ringing.”

Tommy holds completely still, listening. Finally, he hears a faint buzz come from the closet. He pulls open the door, and his eyes land on the pile of his wet clothes and towel in Techno’s laundry bin. Right on top of the towel, poking out from the folds, is his phone.

“Thank fuck,” he breathes, bending down to pick it up. “If I lost that, my mom would’ve...”

His eyes catch on the date at the top of the screen, and he freezes.

Thursday, April 9th. It’s his birthday.

For some reason, the realization doesn’t feel good. It sinks in his stomach, settling at the bottom like a heavy stone.

He closes the closet door and quietly pads back over to the fort.

“Tommy?” Techno asks as he crawls back in to sit on the mattress. Techno’s finally gotten up, sitting up with his own phone clutched in his hands.

Tommy exhales a tiny laugh. “I’m eighteen now.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

For a moment, no one speaks. Then Techno clicks his phone off and sets it down on the bed.

“We should do something,” he says.

“Do something?”

“You know. Go somewhere. Pick up a cake or something. You like cake, right?”

Tommy blinks. He nods his head hesitantly. “Yeah, but—”

Techno slips out from the fort, and Tommy hurries to follow him. He watches Techno hunt through his dresser drawers for a pair of sweatpants, which he chucks at Tommy, and then another pair that he drops on his empty bed frame. He picks two shirts from the closet and shoves one into Tommy’s arms.

“Get changed,” he says. “I have an extra toothbrush you can use.”

“W-what are we doing? Why are we getting dressed?”

“Well, I’m not sendin’ you home in pajamas, number one. But number two, you said you don’t have a suit, right?”

Tommy nods.

“Okay. We’re goin’ to go look for one. Or at least somethin’ nice you can wear. We’re also goin’ to look for a cake.”

“Techno—”

“No arguments, child. Unless... do you really not want to go?”

Tommy could say yes. Techno is staring at him, waiting for him to make the decision, and he could easily say ‘yeah, I really don’t want to leave this space because I think if I leave I might fall apart all over again but this time in public, which is so much more embarrassing, for some stupid reason.’ But he doesn’t say that. Instead, he sucks in a shaky breath and says,

“No. I really do need something to wear.”

Techno doesn’t smile, but something in his face relaxes. It’s pained and it’s broken, chipped and cracked, but it’s not decimated.

“Okay. Let me toss your shoes in the dryer for a couple minutes, see if that helps dry them out at all before we leave.”

“Are college dryers really sturdy enough to do that?”

Techno pauses on his way to the door. “Absolutely not,” he says. “We’ll probably have to call maintenance later.”

Then he picks up Tommy’s shoes and leaves anyway.

---

Techno can’t drive, and Tommy can’t get his mom to let him borrow the car after what happened last time he drove (Techno, thankfully, does not ask what that was), but that’s fine, because it’s stopped raining for the first time in days and the town smells deliciously like wet grass and mud. They take one of the buses downtown, and Tommy trudges the sidewalk alongside Techno as they make the five minute trek from the bus stop to Target Supercenter.

“I like the smell after rain,” Tommy says, shoving his hands into his pockets as they walk. “It smells good.”

“It smells like dirt.”

“Exactly.”

Techno wrinkles his nose, and Tommy draws a purposefully exaggerated inhale.

“Mm, smell that. Dirt and grass and worms—”

“You are such a grimy little child.”

“You can’t call me that anymore. I’m eighteen now. Legally an adult.”

Tommy doesn’t expect the slight pause that follows. Doesn’t expect Techno’s gaze to soften over him.

“Yeah. I guess you are,” Techno finally says. “Now lets go find you some clothes without holes in them.”

“Hey! My clothes don’t have holes! Well, except for one shirt that a moth ate, but it was a moth! What was I supposed to do? Let it go hungry?”

---

Techno has shopped with his mom before, and he hated it. The stores were too big, the lights too bright, and all the clothes she made him try on were scratchy. On top of that, it was tiring. It took *forever*. By the time his mom finally found something worthy of buying (and not just trying on for the twelve-thousandth time), he’d been dragging his feet in exhaustion. Of course, he was also like, *ten*, at the time—but that didn’t change the fact that it had been one of the worst experiences of his life.

He moves that shopping experience up the tier list in comparison to this one, though.

“It doesn’t fit!” Tommy shouts through the closed dressing room door. He’s loud, abnormally loud, and some clerk folding jeans in the men’s section gives Techno a Look.

“What do you *mean* it doesn’t fit? It’s your size,” Techno hisses back through the doorway, feeling himself start to sweat. Shopping and social anxiety do not mix.

“The collar is too fuckin’ small. It’s like they expect my head to be the size of a pea.”

“Tommy, did you undo any of the buttons?”

There’s a pause, and then a shuffle from the other side of the door.

“Oh,” Tommy says a second later, “wait. It fits now.”

Techno resists the urge to slam his head into the nearest metal clothing rack. “Good, now can we get out of here? We’ve been here for like... two hours.”

The door to Tommy’s dressing room swings open, and he steps out wearing the black collared dress shirt Techno found him, and the baggy khaki pants with pockets *he’d* found himself.

Techno snorts at the mix. “You look like Kim Possible.”

Tommy fists both his hands and strikes a pose, and Techno rolls his eyes. “Back inside. Pick from the ones that fit and put the rest on the rack out here.”

“Fine, fine. Okay, Mom.”

It’s not the first time he’s been called mom by their group. His chest twinges at the reminder of Wilbur’s response to him, weeks ago, when he’d told him to stop picking at his food.

“*Sorry, Mom.*” Followed by a teasing grin.

He’d been dying then. Hadn’t he? Techno wonders if he’d even known it.

“You’re not really like my mom, you know?” Tommy’s voice comes through the door.

Techno sighs. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. My mom’s all fussy and touchy. She’s a little smothering, sometimes. You’re not like that. You’re more like... You and Wil are like...”

The dressing room door swings open, and Tommy is back in Techno’s clothes again. Sweatpants and a t-shirt, it’s a comfy clothes kind of day.

Techno holds his breath and waits for Tommy to finish.

“You’re like my older brothers,” Tommy admits, and the way he steadfastly avoids speaking in past tense makes Techno’s heart twist.

He doesn’t cry. They’d done enough of that last night. Instead, he cracks a small smile and holds out a hand to help carry some of Tommy’s extra clothes.

“Little brother, derogatory,” he jokes.

“So you admit I’m your little brother, then?”

Techno rolls his eyes. “C’mon. We’re checking out and then walking to Niki’s.”

It’s probably better he doesn’t tell Tommy he’s sort of always thought of him as his little brother. He doesn’t want him getting a big head.

How would he fit through his shirt collars?

---

It’s only one in the afternoon, and they haven’t eaten lunch, but they walk to Niki’s and Techno places the order while Tommy finds a seat outside. It’s nice enough out, now, that

they don't fear the threat of rain as they sit on the patio. The sky above is light gray, but the clouds are clearing out, and small spots of sun break through.

Techno walks out to Tommy sipping on the Coke he'd ordered, gaze distant as he stares out across the parking lot. He walks over to join him.

"You good?" he asks as he slips onto one of the concrete benches. The circular table Tommy picked out is made of cement, with the three, rounded benches connected to the base. Loopy designs are etched into the table's rim with the words 'Niki's Ice-Cream' subtly engraved alongside them.

Tommy nods, fizzy Coke sliding back down his straw as he releases it. "Yeah. Just thinking."

"That's never good."

"I thought it'd be harder to be out here, doing things. And like, it is, but it's also not. It feels kind of... normal? But also not normal. Like, of course people don't know something's wrong, but also, why don't they?"

Techno's mouth quirks upward. "I know what you mean, but that was probably the most contradicting, confusing way to put it."

Tommy scowls. "Oh shut up, English major. I hate words. They suck."

Techno laughs, then raises his hands from his lap, revealing the plastic-encased cake he'd managed to get Niki to make.

Okay. Well. It isn't quite a cake. It's more like four cupcakes filled with ice cream, and all slathered with sticky, light blue icing together so they sort of *look* like a cake. The words 'Happy Birthday Tommy' are written on top in swirling yellow icing, and little red and white stars fill up the empty space.

Despite the fact that it's not a real cake, and that it's already slightly melting because Niki hadn't had time to put it in the freezer before giving it to them, it looks good. Definitely worth the decimation of his college bank account.

He slides it across the table to Tommy, and watches as the kid's—*adult's*—eyes light up.

"Whoa! Are these cupcakes?"

Techno nods. "They're ice-cream filled. I got cookie dough, your favorite."

"This is sick! S on the tier list, for sure."

Tommy starts cracking the plastic open, and Techno can't help the grin that slides over his face.

"Happy Birthday, Tommy," he says as Tommy finally gets the plastic top off.

For a second, he thinks Tommy is too excited to speak. He stares down at the cupcakes, and Techno can't see his face because it's obscured by a thick mop of blond hair.

Then he looks up, and Techno realizes he's crying. Smiling, but crying.

"I'm going to contradict myself again," he warns, sniffing and wiping at his eyes, "but this is both the best birthday of my life, and worst birthday my life."

"Antithesis," Techno mumbles automatically.

"What?"

"Oh, uh, antithesis. It's like... a literary device."

"Oh you're such a *loser*, Techno—"

"I'm just saying!"

"L, L, downvote on Reddit—"

Techno chucks a plastic fork at Tommy, and laughs when the other scrambles to catch it. He's so caught up in the moment, he doesn't realize another knot has untied and slipped off his chest until hours later, when he's back in his dorm and Tommy is back home with his parents.

He lays on his back in the remnants of their fort, and squints through the darkness at his phone screen.

TOMMY: thanks for the cake, big man. and for letting me stay oher last nightr. sorry if i gave ur floor mould.

TECHNO: It's fine. Gives it more cushion.

TOMMY: more flavour too

TECHNO: Ew. Why do you say these things.

TOMMY: you said things first

TECHNO: I am... going to bed.

TOMMY: sleep is for the weak

TOMMY: L

TOMMY: L

TOMMY: L stands for loser, btw. come backkk. pls?

TECHNO: No, really!? I thought it stood for literature /s

TOMMY: fuck u



TOMMY: slash positive or whatever

Techno snorts and looks away from his phone. At this point, he might as well just *call* Tommy. They've been texting ever since Mrs. Innit finally came to pick him up at Techno's dorm around three. She said they were staying in for dinner, since Tommy didn't really feel like going out after the day they'd had, and invited him along, but he declined. He'd hung out with Tommy practically all day, and although he loved him, there was only so much social interaction Techno could take before he needed to recharge.

Of course, that hadn't stopped Tommy from texting him under the dinner table. And in his room while getting ready for bed. And now, finally, in bed. Or at least sitting *on* his bed. He'd texted Techno a picture of his PC booted up to Moana a while ago, and was probably about halfway through the movie by now.

TOMMY: r u nervous about tomorrow?

TECHNO: The funeral?

TOMMY: yeah

TECHNO: Not really. Maybe a little.

TOMMY: oh

TECHNO: Are you?

TOMMY: a little

Two people laugh somewhere down the hall, their voices bouncing off the walls as they bumble toward wherever their dorm is. Techno scrunches further under his comforter and holds the screen to his face.

TECHNO: It'll be fine. I'll be there with you.

TOMMY: can i call?

Techno doesn't even bother texting back. He presses the dial button beneath Tommy's name, and waits the two seconds it takes for him to pick up.

"What if I get angry again?" Tommy blurts as soon as the phone stops ringing.

"You won't."

"But what if I do?"

"Then I'll be there."

"Last time I got angry *at* you."

"Well, are you still?"

“No. I don’t... I don’t really know what I am now.”

Techno rolls over on the mattress and props himself up with his elbows. “You know you don’t have to go, right? It’s your choice. If this makes you too uncomfortable—”

“No, I want to go,” Tommy says firmly, cutting him off. “I’m just being stupid.”

There’s a brief silence, and Techno hears the tail-end of some Moana song from the background of Tommy’s room.

Slowly, he says, “You’re not being stupid. I’m nervous too.”

“Yeah, but you have social anxiety. You should be nervous.”

“Oof,” Techno says, and it comes out like a half laugh, “low blow, Tommy. Low blow.”

Tommy laughs quietly from the other side of the phone, then says, “Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t.”

Tommy yawns, and Techno glances at the neon green numbers of the alarm clock on his bookshelf. It’s nearly one in the morning.

“You should probably go to bed,” Techno suggests, sinking lower on his elbows. “It’s almost one.”

“Mm. Can’t sleep.”

“You haven’t even tried yet.”

“I know I won’t be able to. Haven’t slept well except for at your place.”

“Well, maybe now that you’ve had one good night you’ll have another.”

Tommy snorts. “I’m not sure that’s how that works, Tech-no-Blade,” he says, but Techno hears the covers shuffle as he slips underneath them.

“I’m going to try and sleep,” Techno whispers, hearing giggles in the hallway again. For some reason, the late night laughter sends prickling tingles through his chest—like tiny bee stings. It reminds him of the night at the STEM center, and the nights in the library, and, and, and...

He goes to hang up, but before he can, Tommy speaks up.

“Can you stay on call with me? Just until I fall asleep?”

His voice is smaller and further away, as if he’d put the phone down on the mattress somewhere beside him. There’s obvious hesitation in his tone. They’ve been together practically all day today, and last night. Plus, they really do need to sleep. The funeral is

tomorrow night, and if they don't sleep, it's going to be an even worse experience than Techno already knows it will be.

Techno's not sure he's falling asleep any time soon either, though, so he yawns and rolls to his side.

"Sure. Want me to read or something?"

"No. Just... just be there."

"Okay."

Just existing, Techno's found, is something he is incredibly good at.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! How's it going? I'm driving up to my uni soon to start setting up my first ever apartment, and i keep laughing over the fact that ik i'm going to get there and be like "omg, this is just like LIFLL!!!" Figures it'd take me writing a whole fanfiction about college to finally liKE college... anyway... senior year!!

comments and kudos are always appreciated! <3

my socials, where I frequently freak out over writing:

[twitter](#)

[tumblr](#)

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

*“We’re in college, Phil. He’s an adult.”*

*“Oh trust me,” Phil had said, smiling, “you’re still kids.”*

Now, Phil watches Techno’s eyes well up like a child’s and hates that he was right.

## Chapter Notes

CWs: grief, funeral. but they're getting closure :')

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil doesn’t know what he expects to happen at four o’clock on a Friday afternoon. But it’s certainly not for Techno to show up at his office dressed in tan slacks and a button down, carting a light pink colored tie in one hand.

“Phil,” he says, walking into the room with eyebrows knit together. “How do you tie a tie?”

Phil glances at the clock on his wall, then back at Techno.

“Aren’t you supposed to be leaving? The service starts at four thirty.”

“Aren’t *you* supposed to be leaving? You were invited.”

Phil sighs. He glances down at the knotted mess of a tie in Techno’s left hand, then stands up and gestures him over. He comes, and Phil makes him bend down slightly so he can drape the tie around his neck.

“I’m not going.”

“What? Why?”

Phil shakes his head. “I’d feel weird. I only knew him for a couple months.”

“So did I, and I’m going.”

“That’s different. He was your best friend.”

“He was your student.”

Phil's tongue pokes out slightly as he picks at one of the knots Techno has somehow created. How he'd managed to get so many strange knots into only fifty seven inches of fabric is beyond him, but apparently it was possible.

"Not really. He stopped by my office every so often to ask for help, but—"

"But you cared about him. ... Didn't you?"

Something changes in Techno's voice, there. It softens, but it's also probably the closest thing Phil's heard to anger since... well, since he came in at the beginning of the semester, ranting about Wilbur making a mess of the library's books.

He looks up, catching Techno's gaze, and his own expression softens.

"Of course I did."

Techno's quiet anger slips away. Replacing it is a plead. "Then come. Please?"

Phil shifts so he can better pick out the next knot. "Techno... I don't have nice clothes."

Techno deadpans. "Phil. Tommy is making me wear a brown cardigan over this. He says it's 'off brand' if I don't. And he's currently wearin' bright red converse because his dress shoes got covered in mud."

"Wha— How?"

"Long story."

Phil finishes the knots, and fixes the tie around Techno's neck.

"Where *is* Tommy, anyway?"

"Outside. His mom's driving us. We're waiting for her to pick us up."

Phil finishes Techno's tie, and steps back to survey his work. For a funeral, Techno's clothes are surprisingly bright. Tan pants, white shirt, pink tie. And then, apparently, a cardigan? At least the brown dress shoes should match.

It's funny, because Phil thinks it's probably exactly what Wilbur would have wanted him to wear. He'd never been one for the traditional.

"Okay. You're all set."

"You're coming, right?"

"Techno..."

It's not that Phil doesn't want to come. He'd liked Wilbur. He'd been one of the first students, besides Techno, to come into his office and instantly energize the room just by being there. He'd been one of the ones gutsy enough to banter back and forth with him, and he

had *opinions*. Boy, did that kid have opinions. On everything. On the poetry they talked about, but also on modern American government, and economics, and ghosts, and whales, and—a sore spot—anteaters. He knew so much, and Phil didn't think he'd ever forget his face the first time he told him he didn't mind his rambling, and that he actually found it really interesting.

*"Sorry,"* Wilbur had said, sinking back into the leather chair after going on a five minute tangent about color psychology and the way it changes in different cultures. *"This is probably boring, and it's not what I came here for..."*

*"No, no. That's really interesting,"* Phil hurried to reassure. *"And it kind of connects to poetry, anyway, because a lot of poets will purposefully use words that have a bunch of different meanings. That way you can interpret their lines several different ways. It's sort of like peeling back layers of an onion. The deeper you get, the richer the metaphor."*

Wilbur's eyes had widened, a glimmer of surprise sparking in them before relief took over. *"Oh."* He said, shoulders relaxing. *"That makes sense. We do that in songwriting, sometimes."*

Wilbur said he hated poetry, but Phil secretly thought he'd been pretty good at it when he wanted to be.

He'd liked Wilbur. A lot. He was a good kid. It's just... he feels sort of like he doesn't deserve to be at his funeral. He saw him a couple times a week for about a month before he died. And sure, he'd been the one to drive him to the hospital, but that just made him feel even worse.

Compared to all Wilbur's friends and family, he was a blink in the boy's existence. A speck. Around for the shortest time possible, right at the end.

"Phil."

Techno's voice snaps him back to the present. He looks up, blinking away the memories and doubts.

"Sorry, what did you say..."

Phil trails off as he realizes Techno's eyes are brimming with tears.

Months ago, at the beginning of the semester, Niki had come to his office and called him to the library on cause of a "situation." When he'd arrived, he'd been met with a rageful Techno, and a stack of books crusted with every condiment known to mankind. Only one person, according to Techno, could have been capable of such a feat.

*"Ban him,"* Techno had demanded.

Phil had grimaced, closing the grimy cover of an 18th century Gothic Literature anthology. *"I can't do that."*

They'd proceeded to argue over books until Phil said, *"He's a kid. Kids do this shit sometimes. It's not your problem to take care of."*

*"We're in college, Phil. He's an adult."*

*"Oh trust me,"* Phil had said, smiling, *"you're still kids."*

Now, Phil watches Techno's eyes well up like a child's and hates that he was right.

"Please come," Techno says, voice cracking. "Phil, I'm going to go there and it's going to make it real, and I'm scared of what happens once it's real. I'm scared I'm going to shut down, or say something stupid that I don't mean, and I have to be the adult because Tommy will be there and Tommy's already so nervous and—"

Phil cuts him off with a hand to the shoulder, and Techno takes a deep, shuddering breath.

"I'm trying really hard to be okay," he says once he's caught his breath again, "but some times are harder than others, and I think this is going to be one of those times."

"Okay," Phil says. "Okay, I'll come. But listen, you don't need to put all that pressure on your shoulders. It's okay to not be okay. Tommy understands that. I understand that. Everyone understands that."

Techno nods, and even though Phil's not completely convinced that he actually *does* understand, he lets it slide for now. If they don't leave soon—aka 'within the next sixty seconds' soon—they're going to be late.

Good thing he wore semi-nice clothes to work today. Jeans, a white collared shirt and gray blazer are going to have to do.

"Let's roll. Office hours are ending early today," he says, and Techno smiles at him through his tears.

"Thanks, Phil," he says as they leave the office and head toward the stairwell. "You're a really good teacher."

Phil smiles. "It helps when you have really good students."

---

The funeral is quick and small, something Tommy is endlessly grateful for.

They start with a closed casket wake, where Tommy knows literally no one besides Techno, Phil, and Wilbur's mom who they met upon arriving. They talk for a little while, meet some relatives, some friends. Then they trail forty minutes to the burial site, which seems like a long time (and is a long time, in Tommy's opinion), but is worth it because it's much closer to Wilbur's home. It's gorgeous, too. A little hill in a field full of wildflowers. The flowers are

just starting to spring up for the summer—tiny crimson, violet, and gold buds opening up to the sky. Tommy picks a couple and tucks them into his jacket. Then, when Techno raises an eyebrow, slides one into his cardigan as well.

“We match,” Tommy had said, gesturing between their matching flowers.

Techno rolled his eyes, but smiled. And he didn’t say anything when Tommy threw a couple of the flowers in after Wilbur’s casket.

It’s weird, Tommy thinks. The wake and funeral weren’t too bad. It wasn’t as hard as he thought it’d be. Maybe it was because he didn’t know anyone besides the people he’d been dropped off with, and therefore everything seemed foreign, like it wasn’t meant for Wilbur at all. Maybe it was because, although the funeral home smelled like vanilla, he made a game of spotting mildew in the corners and on the walls. Maybe it was because he kept thinking about how much Wilbur would make fun of everything here if he could see it.

The funeral wasn’t hard. No, what was hard was leaving.

They step off the grassy field back onto road where all the cars are parked, and something heavy suddenly sinks in Tommy’s chest.

They’re leaving. They’ve brought Wilbur all the way here, to his hometown, and now they’re leaving and he has to stay.

The permanency of death had already hit Tommy before. It’d hit him the very first day, the very first time Phil told him Wilbur was gone. But now it feels like whatever scar tissue had been building over that wound is ripped off again, and tossed into the wind.

Tommy is leaving and Wilbur is here. Forever. He is never leaving. He is staying under the dirt and wildflowers and trees and Tommy is going. Tommy will never see him again.

He freezes in the middle of the road. Phil, only two steps ahead of him with Techno, turns back and offers him a hand, but Tommy shakes his head and takes a step backward.

“No. No, um...”

His eyes catch with Techno’s, and understanding passes between them.

“Go,” Techno says, “go say bye.”

Tommy does. He turns tail and runs back through the field, grass whipping at his heels, dodging other gravestones as he makes his way back up the hill. He can hear Techno, far back behind him, following along, but he doesn’t slow to wait for him. When he gets back to the gravesite, he plops down in front of the flat, smooth stone and places his head in his hands.

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye,” Tommy mutters, swiping leftover dirt from the shiny stone. “You absolute dickhead. You prick. You should have just told us. You should have... I don’t know. It’s not really your fault, but it also is, but it’s not, and I just—”



He doesn't know how long he sits like that, contradicting himself, before Techno arrives. Techno slowly lowers himself down next to him, brown cardigan billowing in the wind, and wraps an arm around his shoulders. Tommy leans his head into the touch.

"What do we do now, Techno?" he asks quietly.

"The only thing we can. We continue on."

Tommy snuffles a laugh. "That's such poetic bullshit. Wilbur, you hearing this? He's speaking poetry at your grave—"

Tommy looks up, and it's then that he realizes Techno is crying. The tears are completely silent, but they drip down his face no matter how hard he tries to blink them away. Tommy's only seen Techno cry once, that night he came over to his dorm and stayed there. It was too dark to really see him, then. Now, with the dying sun and dim streetlights lighting the gravesite, he can clearly see the cracks and gaps in Techno's facade shattering.

"Techno..." He frowns.

"Sorry," Techno says, sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his cardigan. "I've been tryin' so hard not to get all teary eyed, but I just— *oof!*"

Tommy slams into Techno's side, wrapping his arms tight around him and squeezing tight. Techno goes entirely still for a moment before relaxing, body melting into the hug.

"You can be sad, Big Man," Tommy says, pressing his face into Techno's shoulder. Then, almost as an afterthought, "I love you."

Techno laughs, and Tommy hears a teary sniffle over his head. "I love you too, even when you're a little... what did Wil call you? It sounded like goblin."

"Gremlin?"

"Gremlin. Even then."

Tommy snorts a laugh, and they finally pull away from the hug, both wiping their eyes and sniffing their noses.

"Are you ready to go now?" Techno asks after they've turned to look back at the grave. The light overhead is quickly fading, dying out and being replaced by a starlit night. Tomorrow, the sun will rise again, Tommy will wake up, and they will keep going on in this thing called existence.

Tommy stands up, wipes the dirt from his pants, and takes Techno's hand.

"Yeah. Let's go home."

I totally could have ended this fic here - I even thought about it while drafting this chapter - but there was one more important thing I needed to come back to, so... one more chapter left!!! :')

comments and kudos are ALWAYS appreciated! <3

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# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

Endings, he thinks, are bittersweet. Like day-old syrup crystallized over the pages of dead poets.

## Chapter Notes

Cws: grief, brief recall of nearly throwing up

this is one of my favorite chapters :')

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The last couple weeks of school fly past. Dead week is short, spent mostly in Techno's dorm or at Tommy's house. Tommy winds up with a sparkling A in Videography, and when he shows it to Techno, he also shows him his Essempi acceptance letter for the fall and his newly declared major: Film. Techno winds up with a B in Videography, which ruins his straight A record, but—as Tommy said to him afterward—“Some things in life are just meant to be ruined.”

The words throw him back to books ruined by sticky syrup and dribbled hot dog mustard, but Techno doesn't tell Tommy that. He smiles, instead, and says “I guess you're right.”

Techno starts therapy. He's gone before, for social anxiety, but was discharged his first semester of college because he had it (mostly) under control. Leaving had been something he was proud of. But when he hesitantly brings it up with Phil, wondering if he could get Kristin's number and visit her office at some point, he thinks Phil's beaming smile makes him even prouder.

At some point, he convinces Tommy to come with him. The kid makes an absolute mess of Kristin's office. He's so nervous that he picks at everything while they wait: the couch cushions, the wrinkled magazines on the table, the sticky notes and pens at the reception desk. At one point he jokes around with a picture frame on the wall and nearly sends it crashing to the floor. But when Kristin finally arrives, she adores him, so the mess doesn't matter.

It's just life. It's messy and clumsy and haphazard, but they manage. Finals end and Techno has to start packing his bags. He's moving home for the summer, but he doesn't live far—only about two hours away from campus—so it's not like he won't be back for visits.

Besides, Phil's already working to set up a lunch date with Techno, Tommy, and Kristin together. None of them are planning to let each other leave so completely.

For now, though, Techno does have to pack.

He crams his last pillow into one of the neon blue IKEA bags he's using to cart his things downstairs, then zips it shut and stands back to survey his work. His dorm is clean, clear, and empty for the first time in four long months. Four massive IKEA bags sit near the doorway, all piled up like a barricade. His closet is barren, his bed is stripped, his mini fridge is unplugged and his floor's been vacuumed. And Techno feels lost.

This room was where he had some of the best times of his life, and the worst. Over by the closet was where Wilbur sat when they ordered McDonalds at two a.m. because they were studying and Wilbur swore his "brain ran better on fries." The edge of the bed was where Wilbur typically laid when they weren't sprawled out on the floor. He'd chucked pencils at Techno's back from over there, once, until Techno got fed up and launched a hair tie back. It'd hit Wil square on the nose, and they both laughed at the pink mark it left behind until their stomachs ached.

The center of the room was reserved for pillow forts—specifically the one he and Tommy built. It was for soft blankets and hushed whispers, bright flashlights and wobbling smiles. He still remembered the way Tommy cried that night. He hoped he'd never have to hear it again.

He looks to his desk, and remembers waking up to thirty pages of F's and Phil's name glaring up at him. He looks at his dresser and remembers how he'd nearly thrown up in front of it when he realized *I can't call Wilbur, he's dead*.

Techno closes his eyes and doesn't look. Just for a moment.

An empty room's memories are easier to see than a full one's. Once all the furniture, bedsheets, and knickknacks are gone, it's easier to clear away the dust and look at what's left over.

Techno hoists his backpack to his shoulder and walks to the door. He swings it open (*Wilbur, standing outside at midnight with a guitar and a mustard yellow sweatshirt. Tommy, showing up soaking wet and sniffling*) and steps out.

He has to let his dad into the building, because—unlike Tommy, apparently—he can't get in without a card swipe. He's texted Techno that he's waiting outside in their minivan, ready to help load up as soon as Techno's finished.

Techno takes the stairs two at a time to the bottom, and stubbornly does not think about Wilbur almost passing out on him as they made their way through a nearly identical stairwell. Instead, he thinks about struggling to pull on his jacket sleeves as they headed to the STEM building, or the way Wil's laughter always echoed in here, or the time they'd come back with ice-cream and Tommy dropped his cone on the third step, right there.

Techno swings the exit doorway open, walks through the next hallway, rounds into the lobby, and—

“Techno!”

Techno whirls toward the elevators, where a red-headed girl is getting out with a wheelbarrow full of stuff. It takes him a minute to place where he’s seen her before, because it’s been months since that day at the coffee shop and he hasn’t seen her since. But when she pushes a red curl back from her eyes, it hits him all at once. *Sally*.

“Sally,” he says out loud, freezing in his tracks as she walks over. “Hi. Are you— Are you leaving, too?” He glances at the assorted pile of stuff in her cart. He can’t make out much, but there’s a fuzzy orange blanket on top, and a collection of charging cords hangs out of a plastic Target bag.

Sally smiles, bright and beaming. “Yeah. This is the last bit of it, then I’m driving back home. Are you leaving now?”

Techno glances toward the front entrance, and shrugs a shoulder. “Well, as soon as I get my stuff loaded up. I just finished packing it all away.”

“Would you mind stopping by my car, then? I have something for you. Before you go.”

“For me?”

Techno squints at the girl in front of him, but she nods her head enthusiastically.

“Yeah. Come with me and I’ll get it for you. I left it in my backpack in the car.”

As Techno follows Sally out the door and down the sidewalk to the parking lot, he wonders if she *knows*. It’s a frequent query in his mind, now. Every person he passes, every stranger he speaks to, he looks at and wonders *do they know? Do they know I’m living without my best friend? Do they know someone is missing?* But Sally, in particular, he’s really curious about. He knows she and Wilbur kept in touch—had a class together, even—but did she know? She hadn’t been at the funeral. Had she figured it out? Had she been told?

They arrive at a light blue sedan under a cluster of oak trees at the edge of the lot, and Techno stands awkwardly to the side as Sally tosses open the passenger side door and digs through the clutter for her backpack. Her car is small, ridiculously ill-equipped to transport an entire dorm room back home, but somehow she’s made her stuff fit through a series of strategic placing. Wilbur would probably compare it to Tetris. He’d liked stupid little games like that.

It takes Sally a second to wrench her bag free, but once she does, she finds what she’s looking for in seconds. She withdraws a folded sheet of paper from the front pocket, and hands it to Techno.

“We met up at the library, once, to work on our final poems together. It was really late, so we were just sorta screwing around, but he wrote this as a rough draft. Told me I could keep it...”

She trails off as Techno unfolds the paper.

Written at the top, in bold, capital letter scribble that could only belong to Wilbur, is Wilbur's name. *WILBUR SOOT*. Below, in slightly more reasonable handwriting, is a title.

*"A Response to John Keats."*

Techno looks up.

"His poem?"

Sally nods. For the first time, her smile wavers. "Yeah. Techno, I heard about what happened. I'm so sorry."

Well, that answers his question.

Techno lets his shoulders slump. He refolds the poem gently, like it's the most important document in the world, and lets the hand holding it drop to his side.

"S'alright," he says, even as he knows it's not. It will be better. Eventually. It'll just take some time.

For a second they stand there, two people commiserating with each other in the middle of a college parking lot. Then a car honks to their right, and Techno looks over to see his dad's van sitting at the curb closest to the dorm entrance, waiting on him.

"I should probably go," he says, taking a step back. "But... but thank you for this. Are you coming back here next semester?"

Sally nods. "I'll be here. Fifth floor," she says, saluting two fingers toward the fifth floor of their building.

Techno grins. "I'm on the second."

"Junior year?"

"Junior year."

Sally laughs, and her blue eyes sparkle as she turns back to her wheelbarrow. "Let's hope we survive," she jokes.

"We will," Techno replies, and Sally shoots him a smile as she pops her trunk open.

"Have a good summer, Techno," she says as he backs away across the parking lot, toward his dad's car.

"Bye, Sally."

He spins on his heel, clutching Wilbur's poem to his chest as he crosses the lot to his dad's van.

Endings, he thinks, are bittersweet. Like day-old syrup crystallized over the pages of dead poets.

---

He doesn't read it until he's home.

He keeps it in his hands the whole drive to his parents' moss-covered, two story house, but doesn't try to peek or read through the incredibly thin printer paper until he's safely locked himself away in his bedroom.

Away from the prying eyes of his younger siblings, finally comfortable in the nest of blankets littering his bed, he opens the paper and reads.

*"A Response to John Keats" by Wilbur Soot.*

*When I have fears that I may cease to be,*

*I find comfort in the reality*

*that my name may not be carved into*

*gilded rings or tapestries,*

*but that I existed in the stars overhead and the hearts that beat my songs in red.*

*I existed in water fountains and old cafés,*

*in football stadiums on winter days.*

*I existed in pastries and creameries*

*and on long roads home where we took in the scenery.*

*And when there is nothing of me left,*

*no mark or trail which I have cleft,*

*My existence alone is proof that*

*love and fame to nothingness may sink,*

*but I existed, once, in that nothingness. Even for just a single blink.*

Techno stares at the last line—written in scratchy, barely comprehensible handwriting—for so long he'd be surprised if it didn't wind up emblazoned across his irises. Then he laughs. And laughs again. And picks up the poem, and laughs again.

It's not great. If it was a rap battle between Wilbur and Keats, Wilbur wouldn't stand a chance. But it's not... it's not terrible. And it's so *Wilbur*. His existence is laid out in lead pencil across the page, in references to all the things they'd done over the past semester, and Techno wants to laugh and cry at the exact same time.

He traces a finger over the signature at the top, then reaches over the blankets for his phone.

There's a message on it from his mom, something along the lines of "what do you want for dinner." There's a quick thumbs up from Phil, responding to his message that he was leaving and would be back for that lunch date in a week. There's a message from Tommy, and he swipes it open.

TOMMY: you fucker skipped town withodu sayifn goodbye??? hELLO

TECHNO: I'll be back in a week! Clingy.

TOMMY: >:(

TECHNO: I'll make it up to you when I come back, promise. Wanna see what I got from Sally?

TOMMY: ??

TOMMY: who tf is sally. your fish?

Techno laughs. He smooths the poem and props it up on his bookshelf, right next to the hundreds of other authors he's read.

TECHNO: No. You don't remember?

TOMMY: no. is she from your hometown? there's no fuckin way u pulled a girlfriend befor me

TECHNO: NO! The girl from the café. She gave me this.

He snaps a photo and includes it with the message, then presses send.

Tommy's dots hover, then disappear, then hover again. Finally, Techno's phone vwoops. He looks down at the bubbles, and smiles.

TOMMY: and i made fun of YOU for speaking poetry over his grave

TOMMY: always knew english majors were a terrible influence. wilbur really took an L making friends with one /s

"Techno! Do you want food?" his mom's voice shouts from somewhere downstairs.



“Coming!” he shouts back. He taps out a quick text back, then tosses his phone to the covers and scrambles for the door. He’s got places to be, things to do, space to take up in his own blink of existence.

TECHNO: Well y’know what they say. L is for Literature, loser :)

...

*That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet. -Emily Dickinson*

*"ars longa, vita brevis" - "art is long, life is short"*

## Chapter End Notes

:D we're donee!!!! can I tell you how much I dreaded having to write that poem, btw. I have so much respect for poets because my god I am not one of them. my only solace was that it didn't have to be perfect because it was Wilbur writing it, and it was his first draft XD

anyway, thank you so much for reading - both to those of you who have stuck around since the beginning, when the MCD tag was nOT here, and to those of you who joined later on once you knew what was at stake. this fic brought me a lot of comfort to re-read while editing, and I can only hope it did a little of the same for you.

//

comments and kudos are always appreciated <3

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